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The Power of Non-Compliant Logos: A New Materialist Approach to Comic Studies

Stephanie N. Phillips
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The Power of Non-Compliant Logos: A New Materialist Approach to Comic Studies

by

Stephanie N. Phillips

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a concentration in Rhetoric and Composition Department of English College of Arts and Sciences University of South Florida

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DEDICATION

First, I would like to thank my chair and mentor, Dr. Meredith Johnson. Dr. Johnson has supported me as a student and a scholar since I first joined the PhD program at the University of South Florida, and this project would be possible without her or the rest of my amazing dissertation committee. I am extremely fortunate to have Dr. Nathan Johnson, Dr. Steven Jones, and Dr. Jarod Rosello as part of my dissertation committee, and I am so honored to have had the opportunity to learn from these incredible scholars.

Attending graduate school and taking the time to complete this dissertation would not have been possible without the support of my family. My parents and siblings are my biggest supporters, and I know that finishing this project was not possible without them.

This project was also aided by the many comic book fans who gave me their time to discuss their NC tattoos. Quite literally, this project would not exist without them. Artist Valentine de Landro was also kind enough to share his time, insight, and even early drafts of his design work with me. The interviewees who participated in this project gave me invaluable insight into the topic and site of study.

Finally, this dissertation focuses closely on the relationships and fandoms built in and around comic books. This community came to my support many times throughout this project, answering calls for interview participants, sharing artwork, and contributing pictures for me to use in-text. I’m proud to be a member of this community and their support reminded me of just how lucky I am to work in the comic book industry.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables .................................................................................................................................................. iii

List of Figures .................................................................................................................................................. iv

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................................... vii

Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 1
  Locating the NC Logo in Visual Rhetoric ................................................................................................. 3
  NC Logo and New Materialism ................................................................................................................... 7
  Methodology: Iconographic Tracking ......................................................................................................... 9
  Why Tattoos? ............................................................................................................................................... 10
  Interviews .................................................................................................................................................. 11
  Selecting Participants ................................................................................................................................. 15
  Unpacking Fandom .................................................................................................................................. 15
  Research Questions ................................................................................................................................... 17
  Data Analysis ............................................................................................................................................ 18
  Researcher Position ................................................................................................................................... 19
  Chapter Overviews ................................................................................................................................... 20

Chapter 2: Literature Review ....................................................................................................................... 22
  Defining Comics ......................................................................................................................................... 23
    The History of Comics: Funny Books and Caped Crusaders ................................................................. 29
    Participatory Fandom ............................................................................................................................... 33
  Visual Rhetoric .......................................................................................................................................... 39
    Comics as Visual Rhetoric ......................................................................................................................... 45
    Carving Space in Visual Rhetoric and New Materialism ........................................................................ 49

Chapter 3: Creating the NC Logo .................................................................................................................. 52
  Invention ................................................................................................................................................... 54
  Making Comics ........................................................................................................................................... 57
    Idea/Conception ..................................................................................................................................... 58
    Script ...................................................................................................................................................... 63
    Line Art and Creating the Page .................................................................................................................. 67
    Color ....................................................................................................................................................... 76
    Dialogue, Text, and Typography on the Comic Page ............................................................................... 81
    Publication and Distribution ................................................................................................................... 84
  A Web of Fragmented Relations ................................................................................................................ 86

Chapter 4: Fans, Fandoms, & True Believers: How the NC Logo Left the Pages of *Bitch Planet* ................ 89


LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: The seven co-implicating processes of visual rhetoric as outlined by Gries (2015) in *Still Life with Rhetoric* ............................................................... 9

Table 2: Sample questions from interviews with fans with “NC” tattoos.............................. 12

Table 3: Sample questions from an interview with the creator of the NC logo. .................. 14

Table 4: Material processes identified by Laurie Gries (2015) in *Still Life with Rhetoric* that appear in this chapter. ................................................................. 91
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The non-compliant logo from Bitch Planet, created by Valentine De Landro. ............1

Figure 2: Bitch Planet cosplay at a comic book convention. ......................................................2

Figure 3: A remediation of Fairey’s Obama Hope poster. ..........................................................6

Figure 4: A necklace featuring the NC logo created by BadaliJewelry. ......................................17

Figure 5: A necklace featuring the NC logo created by BadaliJewelry and sold on etsy.com. ..........................................................17

Figure 6: Photograph of the author’s NC tattoo. ........................................................................ 19

Figure 7: A panel from Artemis & the Assassin written by Stephanie Phillips with art by Meghan Hetrick and Lauren Affe. Letters by Troy Peteri. .................................................24

Figure 8: Page 1 from Artemis & the Assassin written by Stephanie Phillips. .........................25

Figure 9: From The Butcher of Paris written by Stephanie Phillips and drawn by Dean Kotz. .........................................................................................................................27

Figure 10: In 2018, New York Comic Con had 250,000 fans in attendance .................................36

Figure 11: An example of a comic created by Will Eisner in 1969 for the “M16A1 Operation and Preventative Maintenance” manual used by the US Army ...............................46

Figure 12: The five major components of the comic creation process from the moment of inception to the edited and readable final copy of a comic book ..................................57

Figure 13: A page from Bitch Planet issue #1 depicting prisoner Kamau Kogo wearing the orange dungarees with the NC logo ........................................................................59

Figure 14: A lithograph by Paul Renouard from 1889 depicting four men in prison uniforms at Wormwood Scrubs Prison .................................................................61

Figure 15: The Model, a holographic program that appears in Bitch Planet by Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine de Landro. .................................................................63

Figure 16: A photo from my personal notebook shows outlines that I create by hand for each comic script I write .........................................................................................64
Figure 17: A page from my personal notebook of an outline I created for a *Rick & Morty* comic, published by Oni Press in 2021. ...........................................................................................................65

Figure 18: Page 3 of *Artemis & The Assassin*, written by Stephanie Phillips with art by Francesca Fantini, and letters by Troy Peteri, published by AfterShock comics in 2020. ...........................................................................................................69

Figure 19: From *A Man Among Ye* #2 by Stephanie Phillips and Craig Cermak, published by Top Cow and Image Comics in 2020. ...........................................................................................................70

Figure 20: A sample of a comic page layout that showcases how a Western reader will read from left to right, following the red line through the page to interpret the content. ...........................................................................................................71

Figure 21: A page from Valentine de Landro’s sketchbook showing early design concepts for the NC logo. ...........................................................................................................73

Figures 22a, b, c: The outlining, penciling, and inking stages of a comic page by Craig Cermak for *A Man Among Ye* (2020) published by Top Cow/Image Comics. ...........................................................................................................74

Figure 23: Posted to Twitter by Project Art Cred (@cred_art), colorist Diana Sousa adds colors to a page by Stephen Byrne. ...........................................................................................................78

Figure 24: Posted to Twitter by Project Art Cred (@cred_art), colorist Beq adds colors to a page by Stephen Byrne. ...........................................................................................................79

Figure 25: Posted to Twitter by Project Art Cred (@cred_art), art by Stephen Byrne and colors by Axel Phoenix. ...........................................................................................................80

Figure 26: A page from *Bitch Planet* by Valentine De Landro, Chris Peter, and Clayton Cowles depicting one of the main characters on Bitch Planet. ...........................................................................................................93

Figure 27: A chart showing the percentage of credits attributed to male creators versus female creators during a 6 month period at DC Comics. Data collected by Tim Hanley (2018). ...........................................................................................................99

Figure 28: A chart showing the percentage of credits attributed to male creators versus female creators during a 6 month period at Marvel Comics. Data collected by Tim Hanley (2018). ...........................................................................................................100

Figure 29: Penelope views her idealized self while imprisoned on Bitch Planet in issue 3 of the comic series by Kelly Sue DeConnick, Valentine de Landro, Chris Peter, and Clayton Cowles. ...........................................................................................................108
Figure 30: The Women’s Social and Political Union marching with the broad arrow displayed on staffs (1910) ................................................................. 112

Figure 31: Participant 7’s NC tattoo with the addition of an octopus as part of the design....... 121

Figure 32: Participant 3’s NC tattoo design................................................................. 122

Figure 33: Participant 4’s NC tattoo.................................................................................. 123

Figure 34: Participant 6’s NC tattoo depicting a phoenix rising from the ashes. ................. 124

Figure 35: Variations of the NC tattoo worn by the fans interviewed for this project............ 133
ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to understand how an image becomes a meaning-making actant. By tracing the lifecycle of an image starting with its production, I analyze how the image changes and transforms as it circulates and enters into new and sometimes unexpected relationships. Specifically, I look at the NC logo, an image found in the popular comic book *Bitch Planet* by Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine de Landro. The NC logo, which stands for “non-compliant,” is a fictitious symbol used on prisoner uniforms in the science-fiction comic series, and marks women who have failed to conform to societal guidelines set by a patriarchal ruling class. The logo helped to create a thriving fandom consisting of members who proudly tattoo the NC logo permanently on their skin. Throughout this project I ask: 1) How did the NC logo become a meaning-making actant?; 2) What can we learn about the lifecycle of an image by witnessing its production?; and 3) What does the NC logo’s instantiation as a tattoo tell us about the rhetorical agency of images? In order to answer these questions, I conducted a series of interviews with the creator of the logo, Valentine de Landro, and nine fans who sport the logo as a tattoo. The participants in this study provided in-depth insight into how the NC logo moved from the pages of a comic to a transformative, agentive actant in the form of a tattoo. By studying the complete lifecycle of an image, from inception to reception, I am able to consider both the human and nonhuman actors that help to shape and, in some cases, even reconstitute and reimagine the image both in terms of its appearance and its meaning.

The conclusions drawn in this study have pedagogical and analytical implications for technical communication and visual rhetoric students and scholars.
CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

“Nothing is compulsory. Free will is paramount.
But free will comes with the burden of consequences.”

-- Kelly Sue DeConnick, *Bitch Planet, Vol. 1: Extraordinary Machine*

Note to Reader: All images in this chapter were used with permission. Image permissions can be found in Appendix A.

Imagine a future in which women live to serve their husbands, sons, and a patriarchal ruling class calling themselves “father.” If you question the patriarchy, cheat on your husband, commit “gender terrorism,” such as cutting your hair short or not wearing makeup, or even if your husband simply loses interest in you, you just might end up on a spaceship to the Auxiliary Compliance Outpost, or Bitch Planet. Once on Bitch Planet, prisoners are stripped of their Earthly belongings, outfitted with orange coveralls, and branded as “Non Compliant” (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The non-compliant logo from *Bitch Planet*, created by Valentine De Landro. Located in *Bitch Planet Vol. 1* (2015).
This is the premise of the ongoing comic series, *Bitch Planet*, from writer Kelly Sue DeConnick and artist Valentine De Landro, that takes place in a dystopian reality where non-compliant women are sent to an off-world prison planet. Before issue two of *Bitch Planet* was even released in 2014 by Image Comics, readers began displaying the non-compliant logo (referred to as the NC logo throughout this project) on social media, sporting it on clothing, and even tattooing it onto their skin. Suddenly, an image from a comic morphed into something beyond the pages of the book. Readers, calling themselves “non-compliants,” have established online forums, gathered at comic book conventions, and created fanart using the NC logo (Maggs, 2015). How, then, do we account for the rhetorically active non-compliant logo, reassembled into unexpected configurations as it propagates in unanticipated contexts? This dissertation takes a new materialist approach to analyzing the non-compliant logo as a form of participatory visual rhetoric within a complex network of humans and nonhumans. The purpose of my research is to examine the agency of the NC logo as it circulated beyond the bounds of a comic book and quickly transformed into a powerful rhetorical actant.

*Figure 2: Bitch Planet* cosplay at a comic book convention created by fan @triatriatria (@triatriatria 2018).
This chapter opens the project by situating my work within the scholarship of visual rhetoric and discussions of new materialism. I explain why I specifically chose to engage the NC logo as a tattoo (rather than any of its other varied manifestations) as I analyze the NC logo and the work that it accomplishes. Unlike wearing the logo as a t-shirt design or on an enamel pin, a tattoo is a more permanent decision to make the logo and its meaning a part of one’s body. Tattoos of the NC logo are so popular with fans of the *Bitch Planet* series that NPR, SyFY, The Mary Sue, and other popular press outlets have written about the hundreds of devoted readers who have permanently inked that NC on their skin. The rest of this chapter discusses my methodology, iconographic tracking. Iconographic tracking allows me to account for the entire lifecycle of the NC logo, from production to its appearance as a tattoo, in order to better understand how the image circulates, transforms, and creates meaning. I describe the methods I employed to conduct my research on NC tattoos and how I selected participants for my study. After outlining my research questions, the techniques I used for data analysis, and the researcher position I occupy, I conclude this introduction with an overview of subsequent chapters.

**Locating the NC Logo in Visual Rhetoric**

The non-compliant logo and its original source material, the comic series *Bitch Planet*, are of great interest to visual rhetoricians who analyze the way images operate persuasively, or, as Laurie Gries (2015) states, how images “become rhetorically meaningful via the consequentiality they spark in the world” (p. 3). *Bitch Planet* is a compelling site of study for visual rhetoric because comics offer the complexity of visuals and text working in tandem to create meaning for the reader. While this dissertation is very specifically looking at the NC logo,
it is important to understand what comics are and how they are situated within my field of rhetoric and composition.

Comics are much more than a disposable book of cartoons. Scott McCloud (1993) states in his foundational work, *Understanding Comics*, that “if people failed to understand comics, it was because they defined what comics could be too narrowly” (p. 3). While McCloud does settle on a definition of comics – “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (p. 20) – such a definition does not itself begin to account for the networks and communities that these cultural works operate within. As Neil Cohn (2005) claims in “Un-defining ‘Comics’: Separating the Cultural from the Structural in Comics,” comics usually possess a few distinct features: “images, text, sequentiality, and the ways in which they interact” (p. 236). Simply relying on these elements to define comics, however, obfuscates the complex networks that comics create and feed: “the industry that produces comics, the community that embraces them, the content which they represent, and the avenues in which they appear” (Cohn, 2005, p. 236). Comics have a life beyond the printed composition – from the creative process to the communities they build – that makes them uniquely valuable sites of study, especially within visual rhetoric.

Relying on unnecessarily narrow definitions of comics that refer only to the finished publication (comic book as *composition*), there is little room for scholars to consider and study the broader impact of *production, transformation, circulation, distribution, collectivity,* and *consequentiality* that help us to investigate “how an image intra-acts with humans and various technologies and other entities to materialize, spark change, and produce collective space” (Gries, 2015, p. 113). These seven interrelated material processes – composition, production, transformation, circulation, distribution, collectivity, and consequentiality – were identified by Laurie Gries (2015) in *Still Life With Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual*
Rhetorics. Gries’ book contributes a methodology compatible with a new materialist rhetorical approach: iconographic tracking (p. 113-126). By studying an image beyond its composition, Gries argues, we can understand how these images “become not only vital actants capable of catalyzing change and producing space (and time) but also readily recognized and culturally and/or politically significant to a wide cultural group” (Gries, 2015, p. 110). Gries examines how Shepard Fairey’s iconic Obama Hope image circulated within the U.S. and beyond its borders, changing its rhetorical role as it was reshaped and reimagined by new creators for different and unanticipated audiences.

Created in 2008 during Barack Obama’s presidential run, Fairey’s Hope poster took on a life of its own. Gries uses the poster and its various iterations to prove that as the poster circulated around the world and interacted with “various assemblages,” the poster and “other entities with which [it was] entangled” are both transformed (2015, p. 71). Gries notes that visual rhetorician requires a new methodology that updates the notion of a passive audience to account for its journey. She advocates for a methodology that abolishes “our everyday understanding of delivery” and identifies that our collective “perspectives entrap us into thinking about delivery in terms of a fixed thing, a knowable author, a knowable audience, and an identifiable immediate situation” (Gries 2015, p. 26). In other words, Gries notes that when we think about content creation in terms of content and audience alone, we fail to account for the many ways that the audiences themselves may become creators and engage in the creative process.

For example, one Internet site repurposed the image from the Hope poster in order to depict Obama wearing a turban, or keffileh on his head, changing the original text of “hope” to “Arab.” Such a remediation was intended to stir accusations and distrust about Obama’s ethnicity and religious affiliations. More lighthearted variations of the poster, such as a mural appearing in
London showcasing a popular character from the *Game of Thrones* television series in place of Obama, serve less nefarious purposes. I have even used the Obama *Hope* poster to create a series of mugs within my department at the University at Buffalo that depict the head of our department in place of Obama’s head (Figure 3). The mug was created as a present to demonstrate our department’s collective appreciation for our chair’s leadership and support. Though my mug and the *Game of Thrones* variations are humorous in nature, more serious depictions played a significant role in garnering support for the Obama campaign or inciting critique against it.

During the 2012 campaign, the *Hope* image appeared on “dresses, banners, pins, and posters” at the Democratic National Convention (Gries 2015, p. 236). As Gries’ maintained, the audience did not just passively look at the image and receive information. Instead, the audience became a content creator itself, transforming the image for new audiences and new purposes around the world.

![Figure 3: A remediation of Fairey's Obama *Hope* poster created by the author.](image)

Like the Obama *Hope* poster, the NC logo has the power to create and promote meaning as it circulates, oftentimes changing in physical design in the process. Using Gries’ method of
iconographic tracking, I am able to analyze the life cycle of the NC logo, specifically when manifested as a tattoo.

**NC Logo and New Materialism**

Shepard Fairey tried to account for the success of his *Hope* poster by attributing the attention to “going viral” online. Certainly, the emergence of social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, make it easier to amplify images like the *Hope* poster or the NC logo. However, as Gries (2015) notes, attributing the image’s success and prevalence exclusively to going viral offers little in the way of understanding “how things become rhetorical as they circulate and transform with time and space and contribute to collective life” (p. 3). Visuals become rhetorical actors when they “materialize and actually [effect] change in our daily realities” (Gries 2015, p. 4). Gries honors the agency of the non-human, firmly grounding her project in new materialism.

My literature review in Chapter 2 will provide more information on new materialism and its role in rhetoric and composition. I preface that work here by introducing new materialism and explaining how this theoretical turn has guiding research questions. In Bruno Latour’s (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*, he argues that modernity tries to divide the world into opposing spheres of nature, society, and discourse (p. 64). New materialism rejects duality and claims that reality invites hybridity. Thus, new materialism attempts to account for the reality of complex interactions between human and nonhuman entities, acknowledging that nonhuman things play an important role “in collective existence alongside a host of other entities” (Gries 2015, p. 5). In a broad sense, new materialism asks us to rethink our relationship to *things* in order to better understand our own existence.
argues that new materialism is important for understanding some aspects of visual rhetoric. In many frameworks for studying rhetoric, rhetoric is thought of as an “already-produced and already-delivered object (Gries 2015, p. 7). As such, some methods of studying visual rhetoric – content analysis, semiology, discourse analysis, and psychoanalysis, for example (Rose 2012) – may offer myopic views of an already materialized image and how it communicates to an audience at a fixed point in time. Gries (2015) argues, however, that “rhetoric prevails beyond its initial moment of production; once unleashed in whatever form it takes, rhetoric transforms and transcends across genres, media, and forms as it circulates and intra-acts with other human and nonhuman entities” (p. 7). Thus, my study, like Gries’ examination of the Hope poster, uses new materialism to look at the complete lifecycle of an image. The purpose of this study is to analyze the NC logo as it circulates and takes on a life of its own beyond its original appearance in the comic Bitch Planet. Unlike Gries, however, my study accounts for the literal production of the image – tools used and labor involved in creation.

In the next section, I will discuss my methodology for analyzing the circulation and meaning-making potential of the NC logo tattoo. Through qualitative interviews with fans and the creator of the NC logo, I employ iconographic tracking, a methodology developed by Laurie Gries (2015) to help follow the life cycle of an image and better understand how an image, such as the NC logo, is created, transformed, and reassembled through networks of humans and nonhumans.
**Methodology: Iconographic Tracking**

In order to better understand how the *Hope* poster transformed, circulated, and created meaning, Gries developed iconographic tracking, a methodology that maps out the seven co-implicating material processes of visual rhetoric (outlined in Table 1 below). According to Gries, “iconographic tracking is specifically designed to elucidate how images become rhetorical and iconic in the sense that once actualized in multiple versions, they become not only vital actants capable of catalyzing change and producing space (and time) but also readily recognized and culturally and/or politically significant to a wide cultural group” (Gries 2015, p. 110).

**Table 1: The seven co-implicating processes of visual rhetoric as outlined by Gries (2015) in *Still Life with Rhetoric.***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Processes of Visual Rhetoric</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>Refers to the image’s design, visual elements, and design strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td>Refers to the techno-human labor, activities, materials, and infrastructures involved in bringing a design into material existence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Refers to how an image “changes in terms of design, form, medium, materiality, genre, and function as it enters into new associations” (Gries, 2015, p. 117).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation &amp; Distribution</td>
<td>While distribution refers to the deliberate activity used to disseminate an image, circulation refers to unintended ways the image moves in and out of networks of different people and technologies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collectivity &amp; Consequentiality</td>
<td>As an image enters into association with various networks, the image generates consequences and becomes meaningful. This meaning may be both intended and unintended. Collectivity and consequentiality refer to the way an image may change purpose and generate new meanings as a part of its rhetorical life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While Gries uses a large dataset to map these seven processes, I am relying on qualitative interviews with creators and fans to better understand how the NC logo was created, transformed, and reassembled through networks of humans and nonhumans. Further, Gries admits that her study of the Hope poster is not concerned with production. While Gries does not discuss production in her own study, my project asserts the necessity of understanding the production of an image – the literal labor involved in bringing the logo into existence – to better understand the complete lifecycle of the NC logo, particularly when presented as a tattoo. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, studying the process of production and creation is integral to uncovering what Hannah Miodrag (2010) calls the “web of relations” that work together to create meaning during the process of creation (p. 310). This “web” includes both humans and nonhumans working together to produce the final comic book and NC logo. Only analyzing the finished product and audience reception, however, obfuscates the “social, cultural, economic, political, and technological forces,” as well as “what designers intend, and/or how they designed and produced” their work (Gries 2015, p. 115).

**Why Tattoos?**

While the NC logo has been remediated in a multitude of different ways, including on clothing and even on protest banners for LGBTQ rights, I study the NC logo specifically as a tattoo. Tattoos have historically been associated with deviance and criminal activity. However, in the 21st century, nearly 10-20% of the North American population report wearing tattoos (Doss and Hubbard, 2009, p. 63). In their study “The Communicative Value of Tattoos: The Role of Public Self-Consciousness on Tattoo Visibility,” Doss and Hubbard (2009) interview participants with tattoos in order to better understand the communicative dimensions of tattoos.
“People who wear tattoos,” Doss and Hubbard (2009) state, “may be using those tattoos to help them convey a specific image to others, especially when others can see the tattoo” (p. 63). Many audiences rapidly form impressions and judgements of others based on physical appearance. Doss and Hubbard argue that the act of deliberately and permanently altering that appearance with a tattoo is a form of “impression management” (p. 63).

The research conducted by Doss and Hubbard concludes that people use their tattoos to convey a message, especially when the tattoo is visible. In the case of the “NC” tattoo, the logo’s visibility as a physical and permanent marking has specific meaning to the wearer. Mindy Fenske (2007) contends that tattoos have the ability to disrupt established norms and patterns of behavior that can be empowering to the tattooed person(s). Empowerment through deviance, which I will be discussing in more detail in Chapter 4, is a particularly relevant notion for my study. In order to better understand why study participants chose to tattoo the logo on their skin, I decided to conduct interviews.

**Interviews**

I conducted a series of ten interviews as part of my research. One interview was with Valentine De Landro, the artist and creator of the NC logo, and nine interviews were with fans who have the NC logo tattooed on their bodies. According to Warren (2001), “interview participants are more likely to be viewed as meaning makers, not passive conduits for retrieving information from an existing vessel of answers” (p. 83) and so this approach is particularly compatible with my study. While interview questions were scripted before each call, I employed an open-ended, conversational style, or “semi-structured” style, that allowed participants to engage more freely and not feel forced to give desired answers (Rugg and Petre 2007, p. 138).
Before speaking with the nine participants I interviewed regarding their tattoos, I mapped my interview questions onto five Gries’ processes (Table 2):

**Table 2: Sample questions from interviews with fans with “NC” tattoos.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Processes of Visual Rhetoric</th>
<th>Sample Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Transformation                       | • Where did you first see the NC logo?  
• Have you seen the NC logo anywhere other than the comic book?  
• Why did you decide to get the tattoo of the NC?  
• Does the tattoo mean the same thing to you now as when you first got it? |
| Circulation & Distribution           | • Have you encountered the NC logo in any place that has surprised you?  
• What do you think it was doing there? |
| Collectivity & Consequentiality      | • How long have you had the NC tattoo?  
• Was this your first tattoo?  
• Do you think having this tattoo changes you?  
• Does the tattoo change your relationship with your body (does it change your body)?  
• After [X amount of time] with the NC tattoo, does it mean the same thing to you now that it did when you got it?  
• Socially and politically, it’s a really interesting time to have this tattoo. Was your decision to get the tattoo prompted by any social or political events?  
• Have you seen the logo used by any social or political groups? Why do you think these groups use the logo? |

Questions about the tattoo placement, its meaning for the participant, whether or not the tattoo was premeditated, and participants’ other tattoos were shaped by my belief that tattoos are a form of impression management. Specifically, I wanted to know if the wearer intended the
tattoo as a form of communication, and, if so, what message their tattoo communicates. Further, I specifically asked participants to describe their tattoos, finding that many participants chose to transform the original black-and-white design of the NC logo to include other visuals, such as flowers, superhero logos, names, and symbols. These questions helped me to better understand: 1) the relationship between the fan, the logo, the tattoo, and the comic book series *Bitch Planet*; 2) the lifecycle of the logo; and 3) how the logo became a meaning-making actant beyond the pages of *Bitch Planet*.

The second type of interview I conducted was with the logo’s creator, Valentine De Landro. De Landro is a comic book artist from Toronto, ON who co-created the *Bitch Planet* series with author Kelly Sue DeConnick. Though Gries’ initial study of the *Hope* poster does not account for production, I wanted to understand the entire lifecycle of the image from the moment it appeared on De Landro’s sketchbook paper. I asked De Landro specific questions about production, such as the labor of creation and even the tools used. These questions are extremely important because they allow me to document the inception of the logo and the creator’s intent, previously unexplored applications of iconographic tracking.

As with the questions posed to fans, I mapped my questions to De Landro on Gries’ seven processes (Table 3):
Table 3: Sample questions from an interview with the creator of the NC logo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Processes of Visual Rhetoric</th>
<th>Sample Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Composition**                      | • Why did you create the NC logo?  
  • What was the inspiration for the “NC” design?  
  • Why did you choose to make the logo black?  
  • Do you have any personal connection to the logo? |
| **Production**                       | • How did you create the logo (what tools were used – Photoshop, pencil, ink, etc.)?  
  • Have you created other logos before the NC? If so, was there anything different about creating the NC logo than previous logos?  
  • What was it like to work with Kelly Sue DeConnick to create the logo? |
| **Transformation**                   | • Have you seen the logo appear outside of the comic? If yes, where?  
  • Has it surprised you to see the logo in so many different places?  
  • What’s the most unusual place you have seen the logo appear?  
  • Have you seen the NC tattoo?  
  • What did you think when you first saw a tattoo of the NC logo? |
| **Circulation & Distribution**       | • How did you get *Bitch Planet* to readers?  
  • How did you promote the book?  
  • How did you promote the NC logo?  
  • Do you remember what kind of initial reception you got for the logo? Was there anything about the reception from readers that surprised you? |
| **Collectivity & Consequentiality**  | • Socially and politically, we are definitely living in a really interesting time that makes the feminist work of *Bitch Planet* really important. Have you noticed the NC logo used by any political or social groups?  
  • How are these groups using the logo?  
  • In what ways did the current political climate influence both the story and the logo? |
Selecting Participants

Tattooed interview participants were selected based solely on the criteria that they have the NC logo tattoo. In order to find participants, I put out a call on Twitter, a social media platform. I specifically chose this site because fans of *Bitch Planet* have a well-established and vibrant presence on the platform with its own hashtags and messaging groups. My selection criteria were intentionally vague in order to allow for anyone interested and willing to discuss their tattoo with me. I did not want to limit the age, race, sexual orientation, or gender identification of my participants in any way. Ben Beitin (2014) notes that quantitative research, with a relatively small sample size of participants, must consider how to allow for the most varied perspectives possible on a topic (p. 250). “The most common way to address this question,” says Beitin (2014), “is by relying on multiple roles. Asking who can provide a different perspective on a topic by nature of their role” (p. 250). While all participants in the study were “purposely selected to represent rich knowledge about the research questions” (Beitin 2014, p. 250), I chose participants who offer diverse geographic locations and vocations, allowing for a deeper discussion of how the NC logo’s meaning and purpose can differ for a high school teacher in Texas, to a costume designer in California. All participants self-identify as fans, but their varied personal backgrounds and narratives contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the lifecycle of the NC logo.

Unpacking Fandom

I use the word “fan” to describe the tattooed participants involved in my study, and I will briefly pause to unpack the term. All members of this study self-identify as fans of the series *Bitch Planet*. A fan is a member of a community called a “fandom.” A fandom, says Tsay-Vogel
and Sanders (2015), “refers to a subculture grounded on communal identification among individuals who build upon their shared interests in a media object” (p. 33). Instead of thinking of a fandom as simply an audience, “fans are active in their collection, production, and consumption of media” (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders 2015, p. 33). John Fiske (1992) claims that part of the production associated with these fandoms is the creation of a “shadow cultural economy,” or a unique cultural capital, that comes from a fan-made culture “with its own systems of production and distribution” (p. 30). Fandoms actively create and produce text, oftentimes from pre-existing materials, such as the non-compliant logo. The fandom created by, for, and around the NC logo is a unique effect of the collective and consequential life of an image.

Fans of *Bitch Planet* have created a fandom that is interactive and participatory. As images proliferate rapidly through networked social landscapes (Seas 2012, p. 6), images transform, replicate, and circulate within both physical and digital spaces (Gries 2015, p. 3). Comics offer an interesting site of study when discussing participatory visual culture because the communities created by and for fans are so visible and prolific. In participatory groups such as fandoms, members of the fandom are actively engaged with content as *creators*, and they are not just passive members of the audience. Instead of merely appreciating the production and composition of *Bitch Planet* in comic book form, members of the *Bitch Planet* fandom have created online spaces to meet and discuss the comic, written and published their own stories set in the *Bitch Planet* universe, dressed as characters from the story to attend communal events, designed and produced clothing, jewelry, and other merchandise reminiscent of the story (Figures 4 and 5), and tattooed the NC logo permanently on their bodies.
Figure 4: A necklace featuring the NC logo created by BadaliJewelry on etsy.com.

Figure 5: A necklace featuring the NC logo created by BadaliJewelry and sold on etsy.com.

Research Questions

How, then, do we account for the rhetorically active non-compliant logo, reassembled into unexpected configurations as it propagates in unanticipated contexts? To answer this question, I ask:

- How did the NC logo become a meaning-making actant?
- What can we learn about the lifecycle of an image by witnessing its production?
- What does the NC logo’s instantiation as a tattoo tell us about the rhetorical agency of images?
Data Analysis

Analysis of data collected from both de Landro and the nine fan interviews was an ongoing process. First, I transcribed the audio files that were collected through recording on Skype software. I used the transcriptions in order to categorize participant responses based on the chart of Gries’ seven co-implicating processes – composition, production, transformation, circulation, distribution, collectivity. Analyzing the transcripts helped me to identify similarities and differences in participants’ responses, and code the text of the interviews into categories via content analysis. By reducing interview statements into simpler categories, such as the seven co-implicating processes, I was able to address “how often specific themes were addressed in a text” (Kvale 2011, p. 106). These seven categories, which can be reviewed in more detail in Table 2, were predetermined prior to each interview taking place. Since the seven processes identified by Gries were used to guide the questions and discussions with interview participants, they were similarly used to help categorize and organize the data retrieved during the interviews.

Kathryn Roulston (2013) refers to these categories and codes as themes, and notes that they “are supported by evidence from the data set in the form of excerpts from interviews that link the researcher's assertions to what was said by speakers in interview contexts” (p. 150). To organize and code my data, I marked passages in the interview transcripts with a corresponding category. For example, when an interviewee talked about their decision to get the NC tattoo, I highlighted the passage in the transcript and tagged the content with a flag that reads “transformation.” Roulston (2013) states that these codes help to reduce and organize large amounts of text into categories, while also helping researchers “develop their ideas about the data into assertions that are supported by data excerpts” (p. 153).
After coding and categorizing the interview data, I interpreted my results and their implications through meaning interpretation. When interpreting the meaning of an interview, Steinar Kvale (2011) states, “the interpreter goes beyond what is directly said to work out structures and relations of meaning not immediately apparent in a text” (p. 108). While coding often results in condensing data, interpretation expands the data in order to broaden the context of the information to “re-contextualizes the statements within broader frames of reference” (Kvale 2011, p. 108). Through meaning interpretation, I was able to make larger claims about the retrieved data and its implications to visual rhetoric, comic studies, and technical communication.

**Researcher Position**

My personal interest in *Bitch Planet* as a fan and my work in the comic industry prompted my study of this subject. I identify as a member of *The Bitch Planet* fandom and believe that my affiliation with this community was very valuable for recruiting and interviewing participants. I bear the NC logo as a tattoo myself (Figure 6).

![Figure 6: Photograph of the author’s NC tattoo.](image-url)
I found discussing my own tattoo helped create rapport with tattooed interview participants. I am also a professional in the comic book industry. Having worked with DC Comics, Image Comics, Dark Horse, Oni Press, and others, I have written hundreds of comic books. My work as a comics professional aided me in gaining access to participants that may have been elusive for other researchers. My professional credentials eased my introduction to artist and creator Valentine De Landro. My personal and work experience with comics colors and enriches my analysis.

This position as a researcher, however, does come with a particular limitation. As I will discuss further in Chapter 4, the comic book industry is predominantly compromised of white, heterosexual male creators. The industry is only recently finding ways to become accessible to a new and more diverse readership. It is worth noting that, as a white woman, my researcher position could be potentially limited, particularly when looking for participants for this project. The fans interviewed for this project are predominantly white, and may not represent a diverse view of *Bitch Planet’s* complete fanbase.

**Chapter Overviews**

Chapter 2 locates my research in the context of current scholarship regarding visual rhetoric. This chapter also describes how theories of new materialism shape my understanding of the NC logo tattoo as an agentive, rhetorical, and meaning-making actant. In Chapters 3 & 4, I track the NC logo through the seven processes identified by Gries (2015). Specifically, Chapter 3 analyzes the icon’s *composition* and *production*: “composition refers to an image’s rhetorical design, while production refers to the techno-human labor involved in bringing a design into material construction” (Gries 2015, p. 114). I offer insight into the creation of the logo by discussing the process of composition and production through an interview conducted with the
artist, Valentine de Landro. This chapter showcases a unique perspective about creating images and logos offered by the actual creator of the NC logo. Chapter 3 also showcases some of de Landro’s early designs for the NC logo and explains how de Landro finalized the current NC logo that has since been tattooed on many fans’ bodies.

Continuing to track the NC logo through Gries’ seven processes, Chapter 4 addresses the icon’s transformation, circulation, and distribution. During these phases in the icon’s life-cycle, the non-compliant logo has detached itself from any authorial intent that is described in my discussion with De Landro in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 analyzes the NC logo as it enters into new associations and potentially changes “in terms of design, form, medium, materiality, genre, and function” (Gries, 2015, p. 117). I achieve this through discussion and analysis of the nine interviews conducted with fans wearing the NC tattoo. By looking at the transformations of the non-compliant logo, such as its manifestation as a tattoo, I am then able to better understand how the logo continues “to circulate long after the original designer’s distribution efforts” (Gries, 2015, p. 119) and consider the ways in which the broader fandom is impacted by the “NC” logo. Chapter 5 synthesizes my findings and considers the implications for additional research in visual rhetoric and comic studies.
CHAPTER 2:
LITERATURE REVIEW

“It seems to me that a story without a message, however subliminal, is like a man without a soul...None of us lives in a vacuum — none of us is untouched by the everyday events about us — events which shape our stories just as they shape our lives. Sure our tales can be called escapist — but just because something’s for fun doesn’t mean we have to blanket our brains while we read it!”

-- Stan Lee, Stan’s Soapbox, March 1970

Note to Reader: All images in this chapter were used with permission. Some images in this chapter were previously published in the “M16A1 Operation and Preventative Maintenance” manual created by Will Eisner in 1969. WILL EISNER is a Registered Trademark of Will Eisner Studios, Inc. Used with Permission. Image permissions can be found in Appendix A.

To understand the NC logo as a powerful rhetorical actant, we must first understand what comics are and their unique, visual traditions. This chapter opens with a conversation about how comic creators and scholars have sought to define comic books since the 1970s. I then provide a brief history of comic books that contextualizes Bitch Planet and the NC logo. Then, I integrate comic books and, specifically, Bitch Planet within scholarly discussions of visual rhetoric as I apply new materialist approaches to this area of study. The second half of this chapter defines visual rhetoric and then locates comics studies within its purview.
Defining Comics

The first comic I ever read was a fifty-cent *Batman* story published by DC Comics that I found at a gas station while on a car trip with my family. The floppy, disposable, 20-page, gas station comic book depicted images of The Dark Knight patrolling the streets of Gotham to protect its citizens from the likes of Mister Freeze, the Penguin, Poison Ivy, and other classic Batman villains. Alongside the images were word balloons and captions, translating the innermost thoughts of Gotham’s vigilante hero and providing sound effects for every well-placed punch to a bad guy – “POW!” Comics, with their various words, sound effects, and visuals, are situated within communication and storytelling practices that blend images and text in order to convey meaning. However, defining comics as medium is a tougher task than it might appear, and many scholars and comic creators disagree on what counts.

David Kunzle (1973), in his work *The Early Comic Strip*, posited that there are four conditions that make something a comic: “1) There must be a sequence of separate images; 2) There must be a preponderance of image over text; 3) The medium in which the strip appears and for which it was originally intended must be reproductive, that is, in printed form, a mass medium; 4) The sequence must tell a story which is both moral and topical” (p. 2). Vehemently opposed to this list of criteria, American scholar Bill Blackbeard published his own definition in direct response to Kunzle. Blackbeard (1974) claims that comics are “a serially published, episodic, open-ended dramatic narrative or series of linked anecdotes about recurrent identified characters, told in successive drawings regularly enclosing ballooned dialogue or its equivalent and generally minimal narrative text” (p. 41). In both cases, however, these definitions are extremely specific and, currently, outdated. Printed comics referenced by Blackbeard are no longer the norm as digital platforms, such as Amazon’s Comixology, offer a digital means for
reading and publishing content. Further, it is easy enough to refute Kunzle’s claim that a comic must be currently in print and about very specific and narrow parameters in terms of content. The topics covered by comic creators range widely, which makes the medium so interesting to a wide, diverse audience.

Though not an academic, legendary comics creator Will Eisner’s 1985 book *Comics and Sequential Art* also took on the task of defining comics. Eisner coined the term “sequential art” in order to best describe the work and functionality of a comic book. “The format of comics,” Eisner (1985) argues, “presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills” (p. 2). According to Eisner (1985), sequential art, then, refers to the successful weaving of both images and text presented as part of a sequence to tell a story (p. 127). This sequence is presented in the form of a panel. Panel refers to an individual image on the page. For example, Figure 11 below shows a singular panel from *Artemis & the Assassin*, a comic I wrote and released in 2020. The panel is a static image “spatially juxtaposed” on the page with other panels (McCloud 1993, p. 7). The below panel (Figure 7) contains a caption, and, off in the distance, we can see a sled on a snowy trail.

![Figure 7: A panel from Artemis & the Assassin written by Stephanie Phillips with art by Meghan Hetrick and Lauren Affe. Letters by Troy Peteri.](image)

On its own, the panel does not convey much information. However, when the page is viewed in its entirety, we can see the panels working together to tell a story and indicate the passage of time (Figure 8).
Eisner’s definition of comics as sequential art is far more abstract than either Kunzle or Blackbeard’s. The definitional work proposed by Eisner is intentionally vague to account for a far more expansive view of what could constitute a comic book. While “sequential art” is a much better starting point for the definition that I am looking for, Scott McCloud (1993) notes in his foundational text, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, that sequential art needs to be expanded to contain more specific information about the medium. McCloud (1993) concludes that comics should be defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (p. 9). However, McCloud resists any definition, noting that the very act of defining can
inevitably create the possibility of exclusion, something Eisner was worried about as well. McCloud states, “if people failed to understand comics, it was because they defined what comics could be too narrowly” (p. 3) and the best definition of comics will “be the most expansive” (p. 199). This is particularly important to McCloud when considering the emergence of new technologies that could, in the future, change the medium in unexpected ways.

McCloud (1993) also makes another observation important for this study when he argues that the “audience is a willing and conscious collaborator” (p. 65). While McCloud does not build this assertion into his definition of a comic, he notes that the very act of reading a comic takes active participation on the part of a reader. This participation is achieved as the reader extracts meaning from the presented, sequential visuals and closes gaps in storytelling and time for themselves, filling in details that are not physically present on the page (McCloud 1993, p. 66). For example, if we refer back to Figure 8, the figure in the last panel is cut off above the knees. Despite this cropping, the reader can safely infer that this person still has feet even if they are not physically represented in the panel.

Readers are asked to make intuitive leaps from one static image to the next, taking separate images and transforming them “into a single idea” (McCloud 1993, 2015). Specifically, this

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1 Despite McCloud and Eisner’s fears of creating exclusive, narrow definitions, I would argue that both hinge their understanding of comics on sequential art without a real justification. Neither author offers an argument for why a comic must be sequential. While I agree that they both offer a strong understanding of how sequentially works in comics to tell stories and make meaning for and with the audience, “sequential art” is exclusive to cartoons and images that consider themselves comics, but would not fit Eisner or McCloud’s definitions. For example, one-panel comics produced by The New Yorker providing social commentary often include text and an image working in tandem to tell a story with social commentary.

2 In 2000, Scott McCloud wrote a second book, Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form. This book specifically deals with the unanticipated ways that technology has impacted comics and argues that technology has impacted how we produce, deliver, and create comics.
happens when the reader jumps from one panel to the next, moving fluidly over the empty space between the panels also known as the “gutter.” Nothing is seen in the gutter, “but experience tells you something must be there” (McCloud 1993, p. 67). Theirry Groensteen (1999) claims that the reader’s ability to fill in these gaps comes from a complex “system of codes” that work in disparate ways but, once in relation to one another, signify one unified sign (p. 6). In Figure 9, for example, readers see a man holding and pointing a gun. The next panel is merely a sound effect indicating that he has fired the gun. Readers never see the man pull the trigger, but the imagination builds on personal experience to connect the panels – connect both the visuals and the text – to tell a succinct story.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 9:** From *The Butcher of Paris* written by Stephanie Phillips and drawn by Dean Kotz. Published by Dark Horse comics in 2020. Lettering by Troy Peteri.

These gaps are represented on the page quite literally by gutters and frames that separate each individual panel. Barbara Postema (2013) explains that “the practice of surrounding images by frames or another kind of boundary to separate and define the images begins to fill that gap by making it most apparent. It offers the images specifically by anchoring them and relating them to one another by juxtaposing them” (p. xiii). Gutters are quite literally gaps on the page, but for Postema (2013), Groensteen (1999), and McCloud (1993), these gaps also signify a complex
process of interaction between the page and the reader. Accounting for the various systems identified in Groensteen’s (1999) definition, Postema (2013) delineates comics as “a system in which a number of disparate fragments work together to create a complex whole” (p. xii). This definition, though acknowledging many of the same frameworks as Groensteen’s “system of codes,” offers a far more expansive look at comics. Like McCloud (1993) and Eisner (1985), Postema hopes to offer a broad definition that could intentionally encompass the many ways that comics might present themselves. Specifically, Postema (2013) posits that the study of comics, and subsequent attempt to define them, has created an “erasure of the specificity of the comics form” (p. xi). Postema takes issue with the fact that the Modern Language Association’s (MLA) discussion group and subject area that focuses on comics attempted to label comics “graphic narratives” (Postema 2013, p. xi). The attempt to make comics more acceptable to an academic audience obfuscates the rich work done by disposable “floppies,” including my gas station Batman comic I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Attempting to define comics is clearly a fraught task. However, I chose to put definitions from both academics and creators in conversation with one another because the insight from both is paramount for understanding the medium.

While I appreciate Postema’s (2013) and McCloud’s (1993) broad strokes, these definitions lack the nuance necessary to account for the depth of the medium because they do not adequately account for several of rhetoric’s chief preoccupations: audience and context. The Aesthetic of Comics by David Carrier (2000) claims that understanding comics means understanding that “we the audience project into a comic our fantasies, fears, and hopes” (p. 83). Many people are attracted to comics because they represent “shared desires” and can be adapted “for our individual purposes” (Carrier 2000, p. 83). Comics, Carrier (2000) claims, “are about
the audience” and any attempt to define comics must also account for readership (p. 92). I agree that Carrier raises important concerns about most comic definitions focusing too myopically on the physical comic and its production. As Neil Cohn (2005) claims in “Un-defining ‘Comics’: Separating the Cultural from the Structural in Comics,” a definition of comics must include “the industry that produces comics, the community that embraces them, the content which they represent, and the avenues in which they appear” (p. 236). Thus, this dissertation considers the life of comics beyond the printed composition – from the creative process to the fandoms they help build. In order to continue our understanding of comics, and consider how Cohn’s (2005) addition of context helps to shape the definition of comics, the next section offers a brief look at the history of comic books and the communities they have helped to build.

**The History of Comics: Funny Books and Caped Crusaders**

Scott McCloud (1993) begins *Understanding Comics* with a brief history of comics that dates comics back to the era of cave paintings in order to lend legitimacy to comic studies. However, comics historian Maurice Horn claims that artist William Hogarth (1697-1764) more accurately laid the foundation for what we consider comics in the modern world (p. 321). And, yet another history of comics, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*, Randy Duncan, Matthew J. Smith, and Paul Levitz (2015), states that Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846) was one of the first artists on record to use his paintings to tell sequential, fictional stories, should be considered the “father of the comic book” (p. 8). These are just a few of the arguments about where to historically place the “beginning” of comics. Given that a complete trace of the history of sequential art is beyond the scope of my dissertation, I will begin my own, more succinct discussion, with the pulps of the early 1900s that gave way to the modern-day comic
book. I offer a history of modern comics starting with hero pulps to better understand how and why the comic book medium came to exist, and how this medium spurred a community-wide movement of fan interaction that has been dubbed a “fandom.” While this chapter will go into detail on what a fandom is, beginning my history of comics with a thorough analysis of the pulps helps to better understand how comic book creators and the comic book industry helped to foster fan engagement and interaction with the medium that led to modern-day fandoms, such as the fandom surrounding *Bitch Planet*.

“Pulps,” or pulp magazines, were a cheaply printed form of entertainment typically seen as “for the middle class and educated lower class” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 8). The name “pulp” derives from the printing material – “rough-edged wood-pulp pages” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 8). Some of America’s best-known writers, including Ray Bradbury, got their start writing for the pages of the pulps. Notable and enduring characters including Tarzan (1912) and Zorro (1919) originally appeared in pulp fiction. Pulp sales peaked in the 1930s with the introduction of “hero pulps” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 12). In 1931 an anti-hero known as The Shadow appeared in the pages of pulp magazines, making him the first character to appear in a book bearing his name: *The Shadow: A Detective Magazine* (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 13). The shadow offered a dark, gritty tale with a crime-noir feel and a mysterious protagonist. The Shadow was later joined on magazine racks by Doc Savage and The Spider, early precursors to heroes like Superman and Spider-Man that the world knows and loves today. As pulp sales began to drop as competition from comic publishers began to take root, many of the artistic teams involved with creating pulps jumped ship to Eastern Color and Printing Company. Eastern Color produced a 16-page collection of comic strips called *The Funnies* (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 13). Eastern Color’s success spurred competition,
particularly from National Allied Publications, which laid the foundation for DC Comics. Importantly, National Allied Publications moved the format of comics from comic strips that you might find in a newspaper, to singular issues of a comic book all focused around the same story. National Allied Publications made it a point to print only new material, typically focusing on adventure stories and military exploits (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 15).

While National Allied Publications did well with their three major titles, More Fun Comics, Adventure Comics, and Detective Comics, it was the success of Action Comics and the introduction of Superman that “single-handedly established the identity of the American comic book” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, pp. 16-17). Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman first appeared in Action Comics #1 in 1938, changing the face of the industry completely. Others rushed to recreate the success of Superman and Action Comics, and while many failed, the introduction of the Bat-Man by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in 1939 managed to stick around. The now renamed DC Comics had two massive hits on their hands that would help to establish a comic book empire in American culture. Indeed, “by the summer of 1941 comic books were selling at a rate of 10 million copies a month” with more than 29 different publishers producing content (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 19). Again, by 1943 the American comic book market “totaled 18,000,000 monthly copies, constituting a third of total magazine sales, to a value of $72,000,000” (Ames and Kunzle 2007, p. 552).

The demand for comics and their caped protagonists launched a massive industry that, unfortunately, began to wane almost as quickly as it was launched. A 1950s publication, Parents Magazine, for example, conducted a study that found that 70% of the material in comics contained objectionable content (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 24). But, most damaging of all, in 1954 Fredric Wertham published Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books
on Today’s Youth, a scathing review of the psychological impact of comics that echoed many sentiments from the 40s and 50s concerning whether or not comics were family-friendly. Wertham’s book instigated much hate towards the comic book industry, despite many researchers claiming his arguments were poorly researched and inaccurate, that he managed to launch a campaign “that economically crippled and culturally bowdlerized comic book production” around the world (McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon 2001, p. 4). Though the industry attempted to adapt to the social backlash, by the 1950s, only three superheroes remained in print – Superman, Batman (the hyphen was dropped), and Wonder Woman (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 32). After a quick and dramatic peak in the 30s, comics were faltering and in need of an identity-shift if they hoped to remain viable publications.

Despite many attempts in the 50s to introduce new characters that might catch the attention of readers, it was the editorial guidance of Julius Schwartz at DC Comics who helped usher in a new mode of interaction between fans and the medium. Along with revitalizing some stale properties – The Flash, Green Lantern, and establishing the Justice Society of America, to name a few – Schwartz was a firm supporter of the emerging comics fandom. Schwartz “took the time to respond to fan letters, to help fans connect with one another, and ultimately to support their gatherings at conventions” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 33). All of these actions helped to connect fans to creators and forged an identity for emerging comic book fandoms. Schwartz helped to open the door for fan culture to shape comics (Round 2012, p. 24).

The inclusion of fans in shaping comic fandom directly led to the content produced by Marvel comics, then Atlas Comics, by lone editor Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby. In the early 60s, Lee and Kirby decided to rethink the superhero comic genre and produce heroes that took a more human approach to their interactions. Bradford Wright (2001) notes that this is a departure
from the DC Comics lineup where the heroes have “essentially the same personality” and spoke with the same voice (p. 185). The heroes of Marvel comics became flawed characters that the audience could more personally relate to. In *Senses of Wonder: A Life in Comic Fandom*, Bill Schelly (2001) notes, “I especially liked Peter Parker being an average guy who is rejected by the in-crowd at school because he had brains. Now here was a comic book character with whom I could identify!” (p.42). Peter Parker, alias the Spider-Man, is a teenaged boy, not unlike most of his readers.

While the characters at Marvel comics gained popularity, Stan Lee was making a name for himself that was just as well-known as his creations. Don Thompson (1970) claims that the interest in the “personality cult” that Lee created around himself was unique compared to the faceless men of DC comics, generally unknown to the comic book community (p. 129). “For the first ten to fifteen years of Marvel’s existence,” claims Matthew Pustz (1999), “Lee and his company were selling more than just comic books. They were selling a participatory world for readers, a way of life for its true believers” (p. 56). In other words, readers were buying stories, and they were also buying access to a fandom defined by their interest in a shared text. This “participatory world” has, to this day, become a particularly important and distinguishing feature for comic book fandoms. In the next section, I will discuss the emergence of this community, how the community is defined, and discuss how *Bitch Planet* is situated within this community.

**Participatory Fandom**

It is important to home in on a definition of the comic book fans and fandoms that I refer to throughout this project. As I noted in chapter 1, fandoms are constituted by participants referred to as fans. A fan-made community is called a fandom, which is easier thought of as a
“virtual community where people are joined by bonds of mutual interest” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 301). Interestingly, these fandoms are not defined in terms of geographical location, such as a neighborhood, but, rather, fandoms are unique in their ability to offer an imagined communal space “through [the members’] common relationship with shared texts” (qtd. in Pustz 1999, p. 20). Matthew Pustz (1999) claims that fandoms work to form a “collective identity” through shared interests and values (p. 20). I argue, however, that the fandoms I discuss in this project do more than share an interest in comic books. Indeed, fans “exert influence over the industry and those who make comic books through their engagement with the industry” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 299). Thus, participation and engagement are unique factors of fandom.

The comic book fan engagement that I address in this project actually began within the pages of comic books when publishers in the 1950s printed fan letters at the back of comics. These letter columns offered readers a chance to express their thoughts on the material they were reading, while also connecting them with other fans by perpetuating an ongoing dialogue about the content of the printed stories (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 305). By 1961, some publishers were even printing the contact information for fans in order to help make the imagined fandom and their ongoing dialogue more concrete.

Once again, Stan Lee at Marvel Comics revolutionized the way that comic fans interact and engage by creating Marvel Mania, a comics fandom movement unlike any the industry had ever seen before. Lee appeared as a cartoon in the pages of the books he wrote and edited to talk directly to readers in cover blurbs and captions. Lee called his readers “true believers,” further attempting to solidify the notion of shared space and communal engagement for his fans by giving them a name (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 307). The tone of Lee’s communication
with readers was direct and personal, making fans feel welcome and included. Reflecting on his work at Marvel, Lee himself stated, “as much as I may have contributed to Marvel’s success with any stories, editing, creating characters, I think equally as valuable was the advertising, promotion, publicity, and huckstering that I did” (qtd. in Thomas 1998, p. 11). And, by 1965, Lee had even created the Merry Marvel Marching Society (MMMS) that accepted membership applications for admission into the official Marvel fan club. The fans loved Lee and his direct, inclusive communication with them. Lee noted, “I tried to write as if the readers were friends of mine and I was talking specifically to them” (qtd. in Daniels 1991, p. 107).

Lee became a celebrity to the fans as much as the characters he wrote about, eventually making appearances as a lecturer at colleges, on television shows, and at comic book conventions. Outside of the pages of fan letters in comics, conventions offer fans a physical setting where they can comfortably meet and engage with one another and creators (Pustz 1999, p. 205). These conventions began in the early 1960s, modeled closely on science fiction conventions that had already been taking place since the 1930s. In 1963, a fan named Jerry Bails invited active fans to his home in Detroit where they traded and sold comics, met and interacted with celebrity artists in the comic industry, and sold artwork. While this initial meeting was by invitation, excluding it from the honorary title of the first comic book convention, Bails’ event laid the groundwork for the 1964 Detroit Triple Fan Fair, which is more aptly hailed as the first comic book convention, closely followed by the New York Comiccon in 1965 where nearly 200 guests were in attendance (Schelly 1995, pp. 65-79). By 1968, the attendance of New York Comiccon was over 700, growing steadily into the thousands by the following year (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 311).
By 1982, the number of attendees at San Diego Comic Con (SDCC) jumped to over 5,000 guests and continued growing to become one of the premier conventions around the world (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz 2015, p. 312). Recently, SDCC brought an estimated $135 million into the local economy in 2016 with almost 200,000 attendees (McDonald 2016). New York Comic Con (Figure 10) and SDCC are two examples of the hundreds of conventions that take place both nationally and internationally every year and have grown to include other forms of pop culture, such as television, movies, and anime.

Figure 10: In 2018, New York Comic Con had 250,000 fans in attendance (Pitts 2018).

The popularity of comic conventions is in no small part due to their ability to serve as venues of expression for comic book fandoms. These conventions “have a long-standing tradition of making creators accessible to their fans, allowing them to meet face-to-face” (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz 2015, p. 312-13). Conventions enhance peer-to-peer relationships through networking, panel presentations and discussions, close readings of text, a marketplace to
buy and sell comics and comic book merchandise, and costume contests, featuring fans’ interpretations of their favorite comic book characters known as cosplay.

While conventions offer a highly visible means for fandoms to engage with content and creators, there are additional ways that fans actively participate that don’t demand their physical presence in a determined space. While writing letters to publishers offered readers a chance to express opinions and enter into a dialogue about particular characters and stories, editors ultimately chose what letters were included for publication, and which ones were left out. In order to expand the conversation in a more inclusive format, “fanzines” began to appear as early as the 1950s (Pustz 1999, p. 178). Wertham, the author of Seduction of the Innocent, defined fanzines as “un-commercial, non-professional, small-circulating magazines which their editors produce, publish, and distribute” (qtd. in Pustz 1999, p. 178). Along with printing essays and reviews, fanzines often published amateur comic work that helped individuals hoping to break into the industry show off their work and gain an audience. One of the longest-running and widely circulated fanzines, Rocket’s Blast-Comicollector, saw its peak circulation at 2,500 per issue in 1964 (Pustz 1999, p. 183).

These fanzines also gave way to larger and more professional publications, some of which still exist to this day. In the 1970s, a fan publication called All in Color for a Dime began publishing essays by fans about the industry, marking the first attempt to produce comic scholarship. Along with writing about the industry, fans were also producing information about the content they were purchasing, trading, and selling. The 1970 Comic Book Price Guide began the work of indexing the comic books on the market and listing their market prices (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz 2015, p. 313-14). The publication of the Comic Book Price Guide prompted an influx of collectors invested in the price and rarity of certain books. Thanks to the Guide, “even...
‘the little kid down the block’ would have a way to assign value to the stack of comics that his parents have saved through the years” (Shelly 1999, p. 144).

Both *All in Color* and the *Guide* made way for significant publications in the following years, such as *The Comics Journal*, which still appears bi-annually and online, containing comic book commentary and news. In the 1980s *Wizard* magazine gained prominence as a fan-published magazine containing information about upcoming publications, reviews, interviews with creators, and information about comic price and value (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz 2015, p. 319). While other publications, such as *Heroes Illustrated*, attempted to follow in *Wizard*’s steps, *Wizard* was the publication for fans by fans, and eventually spilled onto the convention hall floors in the form of “Wizard World,” dozens of comic conventions that take place annually (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz 2015, p. 319).

Today, these kinds of publications take the shape of Internet forums, websites, news sites, journals, blogs, and more. These websites range in terms of content, typically presenting many of the same formats found in early journals and fanzines (creator interviews, reviews, essays, criticism, etc.). The most prominent current content that did not also appear in fanzines of the 50s and beyond, however, is the increased popularity of fan fiction. “Fan fiction” refers to fans producing their own material “using characters, situations, and images that are under copyright protection” (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz 2015, p. 323). Fan fiction includes amateur storytelling that explores additional narratives for popular characters, oftentimes extending the universe beyond the material regaled as canon (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz 2015, p. 323.

From conventions, cosplay, and fanzines, to fan fiction and collector’s guides, comic book fandoms are anything but *inactive*. Fandoms represent a host of engaged members
invested in actively shaping and producing content by, for, and about comic books. How, then, are these fandoms interacting with, and making meaning from, visuals?

**Visual Rhetoric**

Like comic books and comic scholarship, visual rhetoricians have created a sizable body of definitional literature. For example, *Defining Visual Rhetoric and Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) looks to create a visual vocabulary that will delineate and demarcate the boundaries of visual rhetoric. Initially, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) express an interest in creating definitional work that is not too specific and exclusive (much like McCloud and Eisner’s attempts to create a broad definition of comics). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) note that even the subtitle of their book – *The Grammar of Visual Design* – was carefully chosen in order to help distinguish their study of visuals from the study of words, or “lexis” (p. 1). In this way, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) hope to propose a definition of visual rhetoric that regards “the visual component of a text [as] an independently organized and structured message, connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it – and similarly the other way around” (p. 18).

What Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) are combating is the assumption that 1) visuals are subservient to text; 2) visuals can only be studied in the same way we study text; and 3) visuals rely on text to make meaning. To exemplify this argument, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) cite textbooks used in primary school: early years of schooling were accompanied by texts rich with illustrations, while later years began to give way to a predominately greater portion of written text (p. 16). Given that elite groups in society cling to the notion of verbal literacy’s dominance,
visuals create opposition because they provide alternatives to written forms of literacy (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, p. 17).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) push us to move beyond the model established by Roland Barthes, who argues that an image’s meaning is “always related to and, in a sense, dependent on, verbal text” (qtd. in Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, p. 18). Barthes does not separate image and text and prioritizes the text as the mode through which images would be given any meaning. If we applied this analysis to comics, Barthes would claim that the text over each panel, such as dialogue and captions, would give the visual in the panel meaning – “verbal text extends the meaning of the image” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, p. 18). While Barthes acknowledged that visuals could produce meaning, he grounds his study of images entirely in written and verbal text, prioritizing the latter. It is possible for both language and visual communication “to realize the ‘same’ fundamental systems of meaning that constitute our cultures, but […] each does so by means of its own specific forms” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, p. 19). Thus, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) push visual rhetoric to consider that visuals are more agentive than Barthes claims. Visuals have their own ability to create meaning-making, and, if we are going to study images, we must be willing to develop new, unique means of analysis.

Even if we do (or can) separate images from text, the struggle to define what makes these visuals rhetorical continues to be the basis of many discussions and debates. In their preface to Defining Visual Rhetorics, Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers (2004) maintain that creating rigid boundaries for the field is not productive:

Scholars engaged in visual analysis have also (with notable exceptions) largely neglected to discuss the ways in which their work is truly rhetorical, as opposed to an example of cultural studies or semiotics. What seems clear is that the turn to the visual has
problematized any attempts to distinguish between those methodologies, blurring further what were already quite fuzzy and often shifting boundaries between them. But while it would make little sense to try to draw any rigid boundaries between those methodologies, we think it is still useful to ask of any scholar what aspects of his or her work make it legitimate or useful to label such work “rhetorical.” (p. x)

Hill and Helmers (2004) assert that any attempt to “nail down” a definition of visual rhetoric would simply be a “naïve notion” (p. x). While too rigid a definition could negatively impact the work rhetoricians have to offer the field of visual rhetoric, Hill and Helmers (2004) make it difficult to understand why visuals should be situated within rhetorical studies at all. Why, for example, does this work not belong to semiotics, cultural studies, or art history?

However, it is entirely possible that Hill and Helmers’ (2004) call for fluidity in the field was in direct response to James Elkins’ (2003) assertion in Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction that visual rhetoric must have rigidity in order to be taken seriously. In fact, in Elkins’ opening chapter – “Ten Ways to Make Visual Studies More Difficult” – he claims that, while the newness and excitement in the field of visual studies is a good thing, “there is a significant gap between the energetic new scholarship and the kind of concentration that could make visual studies a central concern of the university” (p. 63). Visual studies, Elkins continues, are “too easy” because “scattered subjects and untheorized choices of methods make it fairly simple to generate texts and unrewarding to compare one study to another” (p. 63). Scholarship in visual rhetoric, then, can be about literally anything, ranging from postcards to tattoos, but the unique and interesting sites of study are not accompanied by “theoretical or ideological innovation” (p. 63). In order to reform the field, Elkins states:
I would like to see a visual studies that is denser with theories and strategies, more reflective about its own history, warier of existing visual theories, more attentive to neighboring and distant disciplines, more vigilant about its own sense of visuality, less predictable in its politics, and less routine in its choice of subjects. Why not make visual studies into the subject its name implies: the study (using the full range of theories from every interested discipline) of the visual (in all its forms, from the highest artwork to the lowest list)? Why not work to condense the many disparate kinds of visual competence in the arts and sciences into a single place? (Or in the complementary metaphor: Why not expand localized studies of the visual so that they can begin to intersect and merge?) Why not question the visual as stringently and vigilantly as possible? (p. 65)

Interestingly, Elkins (2003) and Hill and Helmers (2004) are actually expressing a similar concern about the difficulties to define specific boundaries and methodologies within the field. Though Hill and Helmers’ (2004) argument against such rigidity is significant in that they attempt to include as much visual work as possible, Elkins’ (2003) argument is importantly questioning how rhetoric can differentiate from pre-existing visual studies and contribute something new and meaningful to the subject area.

For Sonja K. Foss (2004), that means understanding visual objects as well as representations of visual data. In Foss’ (2004) essay, “Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory,” she closely follows the argument of Hill and Helmers (2004) in her analysis that building a rigid definition for visual rhetoric can be unnecessarily constraining for scholarship. She notes that “the diversity that characterizes [the study of visual rhetoric] is exciting and energizing, but it can also be bewildering” (p. 304).
While agreeing with Hill and Helmers’ concerns about creating a narrow definition of the field, Foss (2004) does attempt to situate visual rhetoric within rhetoric more specifically:

. . . the term, visual rhetoric, has two meanings in the discipline of rhetoric. It is used to mean both a visual object or artifact and a perspective on the study of visual data. In the first sense, visual rhetoric is a product individuals create as they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating. In the second, it is a perspective scholars apply that focuses on the symbolic processes by which visual artifacts perform communication. (p. 304)

Despite Foss’ support of Hill and Helmer’s notion that building an agreed-upon definition of visual rhetoric would prove difficult for the field, her essay also showcases the inherent contradiction (noted by Elkins) that in order to argue that visual rhetoric is a field, definitional work will and must occur.

In their Introduction to their anthology *Eloquent Images: Word and Image in the Age of New Media*, Mary E. Hocks and Michelle R. Kendrick (2003) claims that these disputes about the purview of visual rhetoric are not new: “The relationships among word and image, verbal texts and visual texts, ‘visual culture’ and ‘print culture’ are interpenetrating, dialogic relationships. The contradictions, overlaps, and paradoxes inherent in the rhetorical use and interpretation of words and images have been with us since the earliest verbal and visual communication systems…” (p. 1). While the authors call for new approaches to visuals and design studies, they note that the definition of visual rhetoric can be hard to pin down due to the “complex and often contradictory relations of word and image” (Hocks and Kendrick 2003, p. 1). While Hocks and Kendrick don’t specifically offer a definition of visual rhetoric, the first essay in their anthology, “Visual and Verbal Practices in New Media” by Jay David Bolter
(2004), does provide a concrete reasoning for defining boundaries and created a unified methodology for practitioners:

Any theory that is going to be useful for actual practice must offer the practitioner guidance in conceiving and executing the form of her work. A new critical theory should offer in addition an understanding of the cultural contexts in which the form is embedded. Such a theory should analyze and even criticize current cultural practices through new media forms . . . Design in context must be critical and productive at the same time. (p. 34)

If visual rhetoric is to exist as an actual field of study, Bolter argues that parameters must exist to help researchers demarcate their work as *rhetoric*.

**Comics as Visual Rhetoric**

While a plethora of scholarship exists regarding the integration of comics into the college composition classroom (eg. Vie & Dieterle 2016; Dickinson & Werner 2015; Sealey-Morris 2015; Brumberger & Northcut 2013; Arner 2010), visual rhetoric and technical communication appear less apt to consider comics as a site of inquiry and research. Han Yu (2015) argues that this could be due, in part, to a perceived lack of technicality, and that scholars often consider comics a “layperson’s medium” (p. 250). While the most recent special issue from *Technical Communication Quarterly* (2020) on comics and graphic storytelling in technical communication explores the potential for comics to contribute “to creative methods and practices that create immersive and experiential user-centered documentation” (Bahl, Figueiredo, & Shivener 2020, p. 220), editors Erin Kathleen Bahl, Sergio Figueiredo, and Rich Shivener (2020) note that research on the relationship between comics, graphic storytelling, and technical communication “remains under-explored” (p. 219)
Recently, technical communication scholars have noted the potential for comics to contribute “to creative methods and practices that create immersive and experiential user-centered documentation” (Bahl, Figueiredo, & Shivener 2020, p. 220). In September 2020, for example, *Technical Communication Quarterly* published a special issue on comics and graphic storytelling in technical communication. In the first article of the special issue, “Conceptual Art or Readable Contract: The Use of Comics in Technical Communication” by Han Yu (2020), Yu claims that comics’ ability to ask audiences to engage with visual and linguistic content and actively participate in meaning-making “can be especially useful for creating instructions, educational materials, and outreach messages” (p. 222). In *The Other Kind of Funnies: Comics in Technical Communication*, Yu (2015) makes the argument that using comics in technical communication can help communicators distill large amounts of complex information and present it to diverse audiences. Yu (2015; 2020) is a notable champion for the value of comics both for technical communicators and their audiences.

Of course, comics as a form of technical communication are not necessarily new and, as Bahl, Figueiredo, & Shivener (2020) note in the introduction to *Technical Communication Quarterly* special issue on comics and technical communication, “comics and graphic storytelling have figured into technical communication for decades” (p. 219). Indeed, many prominent graphic storytellers, such as Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, have also participated in comics as a form of technical communication: In 1969, for example, Eisner created the “M16A1 Operation and Preventative Maintenance,” a manual for the U.S. army (Figure 12), and in 2008 McCloud generated a series of comics to explain the mechanics behind Google Chrome (Bahl, Figueiredo, & Shivener 2020, p. 219).
While comics have appeared in technical communication for quite some time, Bahl, Figueiredo, & Shivener (2020) argue that, within the field, “our research on such a relationship remains under-explored” (p. 219). I would argue that this noted gap in research and scholarship utilizing comics is, at least in part, due to visual rhetoric’s ongoing battle to define itself, as well as the similar battle within comics scholarship to define what comics are. To complicate matters further, a significant proportion of comic scholarship is concerned with whether comics belong in the academy at all. Indeed, such unease regarding the acceptance of comic books in academia harkens back to an earlier discussion of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) who stated that visuals challenge the dominant mode of text-based literacy (p. 17). Philip Troutman (2013) suggests that, given the newness of comic studies, this research “sits somewhat uneasily in the academy, both because of the medium’s image/text composition, which sets it outside traditional disciplinary purviews, and because of its popular nature, which has engendered both an ivory-
tower skepticism on the one hand, and an ‘anti-academic’ response by some popular culture scholars on the other” (p. 120). Indeed, as we saw in the last section, comic publications were initially written by fans for fans. That means comics making their way into serious academic scholarship is a relatively new phenomena with “a general start-date of the early 2000s” (Streirer 2011, p. 265).

In Jan Baetens’ (2011) “Abstraction in Comics,” he takes a critical approach to comics but makes a distinction between “mainstream comics and more highbrow graphic novels” (p. 94). Julia Round (2010) similarly notes that the acceptance of comics in academia comes from the comic industry’s ability to mature beyond caped crusaders, “bringing the graphic novel closer to the aesthetic of the literary text” (p. 15). Comics, or graphic novels, have had to prove their importance by offering a close approximation to “literature.” Superhero comics, says Weldon (2016), were kid stuff, or “junk culture” (np). Will Eisner first coined the term “graphic novel” in his 1978 book, A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories, as a way to separate his work from the “junk culture” of superheroes (Weldon 2016, np). If Eisner hoped to be taken seriously, and prove the maturation of his content, he would need to put space between himself and men with capes and tights.

Comics have had an uphill battle to work their way into scholarly disciplines, particularly disciplines like visual rhetoric that are having similar conversations about identity, definitions, and boundaries. This difficulty is germane to the present study because, under the exclusive work of separating graphic novels from comics, Bitch Planet would not be “high-brow” enough for critical scholarship. Technical communication scholars are among the academics to more readily acknowledge the value of comics (doing little work to distinguish them from graphic novels), embracing them as yet another avenue for communicating with design (Bernhard 1980, p. 310).
For example, Abbott (2020), Friesen, Van Stan, and Elleuche (2018), Yu (2017), and Opsteegh (2009) all examine the ways comics can help enhance technical communication. Yu (2020) states, “By employing rhetorical moves such as dialogic discourses, storytelling, surrogate users, anthropomorphism, analogies, and more, comics can promote reader engagement, enhance comprehension, create reader-centered communication, craft persuasion, and facilitate cross-cultural communication. As such, they can be especially useful for creating instructions, educational materials, and outreach messages” (Yu 2017, par. 2). Yu (2017) employs qualitative discourse analysis to investigate Robert Sikoryak’s Terms and Conditions: The Graphic Novel. Yu argues that Sikoryak’s parody of the Apple terms and conditions does not create effective technical communication. Terms and Conditions lifts the text from the original source material (Apple’s manual) and places the text on top of visuals in smaller chunks. Yu (2017) urges the field “to consider how to reduce the verbal dominance in conventional technical communication and replace textual cues with visual and other cues for an effective comics experience” (n.p.). However, Yu (2017) also notes that one of the struggles of studying and implementing comics into technical communication’s discourse is the lack of abundance of these kinds of studies in the field.

While my project is not concerned with comics in technical communication specifically, I use the example from Yu’s (2017) research to demonstrate how visual rhetoricians acknowledge the merit of comics as a site of study but still struggle with how best to integrate them into our research. How, then, should rhetoric and composition account for the nuanced, networked, sequential stories in comics? In the next section I will look at how new materialism, particularly used by Laurie Gries (2015), offers a new, stronger approach to comics scholarship in visual rhetoric.
Carving Space in Visual Rhetoric and New Materialism

So far, I have discussed the ongoing debate about how to define comics, how comics and fandoms distinguish themselves as a participatory culture, and how the field of visual rhetoric defines itself and makes use of comics. I bring close this chapter by viewing these topics through a new materialist lens. Again, I look to Laurie Gries (2015) in her application of new materialism to the study of visuals, such as the Obama Hope poster. My own study follows from Gries’ methodology by including new materialism in order to analyze the NC logo as agentive.

New materialism argues “that any bifurcation of humans and things, culture and nature, object and subject fails to acknowledge the ontological hybridity that constitutes reality” (Gries 2015, p. 5). In part, new materialism is motivated by the need for assessing “complex phenomena such as climate change, genetically modified foods, and e-waste, all of which are constituted by a complex, dynamic assemblage of intermingling and historically produced discursive, material, natural, social, technological, and political actants” (Gries 2015, p. 6). Gries argues that such complexity cannot readily be investigated by methodologies that prioritize “language’s ability to account for reality, agency, and ontology” (Gries 2015, p. 6). Thus, things, such as the poster or the NC logo, are equal to their human counterparts, and new materialism offers a critique of the prioritization of human power and language (Gries 2015, p. 5): “as such, new materialists are developing new modes of analysis that give ‘material factors their due in shaping society and circumscribing human prospects’” (Coole and Frost 2010, qtd. in Gries 2015, pp. 5-6). We have seen a similar argument play out among those theorizing visual rhetoric. Attempts to define (or not define) visual rhetoric seek a methodology that would distinguish visuals from text and remove visuals from their subservient role to text (seen predominantly in
Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). New materialism, then, acknowledges that matter can have meaningful and transformative characteristics in the same way that humans can though these characteristics are typically reserved for humans alone (Gries 2015, p. 6).

Similar to the emergence of new materialism in contemporary philosophy, Object Oriented Ontology offers a focus on the object, or power of the non-human. Ian Bogost (2012), for example, situates his view of non-human things in line with Graham Harman’s object-oriented philosophy: “[Harman] suggests that objects do not relate merely through human use, but through any use, including all relations between one object and any other” (qtd. in Bogost, 2012, p. 6). From Harman’s philosophy, Bogost (2012) derives his own object-oriented ontology (OOO). In OOO, things are at the center of being: OOO “contends that nothing has special status, but everything exists equally” (Bogost 2012, p. 6). Typically, things are seen as the compilation of ever-smaller bits or as constructed through human behavior, yet OOO attempts to create a discussion based around a thing’s ability to exist both with and without human interaction and relations.

If movements such as new materialism and OOO ask how nonhumans can be included in our understanding of reality as actors with equal agency as humans, then examining the rhetorical, meaning-making potential of images, even past the point of their production, is paramount to the study of visual rhetoric. “Nonhuman things, such as images,” states Gries (2015), “also experience rhetorical becoming(s) in that their potential to alter reality and reassemble collective life is constantly materializing via their multiple and distributed encounters” (p. 32). In this sense, “life” refers to a thing’s “complex and intense vitality” and challenges us to consider the use of a word typically reserved for humans as applied to nonhuman entities (Gries 2015, p. 8). Thus, in order to understand the life of the NC logo from
conception to the comic page and beyond, I must discern how the logo operates within a network (such as a fandom), as well as on its own. This means that I am interested in the complete lifecycle of the image – composition, production, transformation, circulation, distribution, collectivity, and consequentiality. While Gries (2015) does not look at the production or composition of the Obama Hope poster, her work creates a methodology that I will use in the next chapter to begin building my own argument for the agentive and meaning-making capability of the NC logo.
CHAPTER 3:
CREATING THE NC LOGO

“A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face.”

-- Jorge Luis Borges, Dreamtigers

Note to Reader: Some images in this chapter were previously published by Image Comics, AfterShock Comics, and Top Cow Productions. All images are used with permissions. Permissions can be found in Appendix A.

In this chapter I analyze the composition and production of the NC logo. Laurie Gries (2015) states that “composition refers to an image’s rhetorical design, while production refers to the techno-human labor involved in bringing a design into material construction” (p. 114). In terms of the NC logo and the comic Bitch Planet, then, I intend to discover how the fragmented components of a comic book – images, text, captions, sound effects, binding, printing, etc. – work together to communicate meaning. Considerations of composition and production must include “social, cultural, economic, political, and technological forces” as well as “what designers intend, and/or how they designed and produced” their work (Gries 2015, p. 115). Understanding composition and production is beneficial to understanding how, and why, some
images, such as the NC logo or the Obama Hope poster, are repurposed and reproduced in a myriad of different ways.

I conducted an interview with the NC logo’s creator, Valentine de Landro, to help me identify “emotions, thoughts, actions, experiences, historical and personal backgrounds” that may have influenced the production and composition (Gries 2015, p. 115). de Landro is a Canadian comic book artist, illustrator, and designer whose work has appeared with Marvel, DC Comics, IDW, Valiant Entertainment, and Dark Horse. In 2014, de Landro co-created the Image Comics series *Bitch Planet* with writer Kelly Sue DeConnick. How, I ask, did de Landro conceive of the logo and how did he literally create the logo? From there, I seek to answer the larger question of what we can gain about the lifecycle of an image by understanding its creation through stories and information shared by its creator.

As Gries (2015) states in *Still Life With Rhetoric*, design is often impacted by institutional forces that are inherent to a specific industry (p. 116). In the case of the NC logo, de Landro specifically created a logo that would live in the pages of a comic book. Understanding the production and composition of the logo, then, means analyzing the decisions that a comic book creator makes during the stages of production and composition. For de Landro, the host of choices involved in producing the page of a comic means that, along with considering how to create each page of *Bitch Planet*, he needed to consider where and how the NC logo was going to occupy space on each page and within the panels. How will this logo impact the narrative, both in terms of time and space? What is the impact both on the reader and for the artist depicting the logo? Using my interview with de Landro as the basis for a discussion about composition and production, the purpose of this chapter is to identify how the NC logo was conceptualized by the
artist and produced in the pages of the comic, as well as understanding how all components of a comic book work together to create meaning.

**Invention**

In Chapter 2 I traced an ongoing debate about the definition of a comic book. A definition of “art” is beyond the purview of this dissertation. As I begin this chapter, however, I would like to make note of two important perspectives on art taken up by cartoonists Scott McCloud (1993) and James Kochalka (1999). McCloud claims that art is a form of communication where the creators try to clearly send a “message” to the audience. “The mastery of one’s medium,” McCloud (1993) states, “…is the degree to which the artist’s ideas survive the journey” (p. 196). McCloud considers art’s progression as a completely linear process, imagining the creation moving from “mind to hand to paper to eye to mind” (McCloud 1993, p. 195). In *The Horrible Truth About Comics* (1999), Kochalka challenges this perspective. Art, states Kochalka, “is not a way of conveying information. It’s a way of understanding information” (pp. 16-17). Kochalka claims that to understand art, one must focus on how the creator is making sense of the world, versus how the audience perceives the finished creation. For Kochalka, McCloud’s orientation towards art is far too focused on the final reception. Art, then, should not be about how well the audience receives a message, but what the artist gains in the process of creation – “creating a work of art is a means we have of making sense of the world” (Kochalka 1999, p. 17). Arguably, Kochalka’s discussion of art prioritizes the creator, while McCloud prioritizes the message and the audience, seemingly removing the creator from the process.
As I move forward with a discussion of process, I give credence to both McCloud’s and Kochalka’s observations. While McCloud’s own understanding of art is perhaps more compatible with that of those scholars in rhetoric and composition and English studies who purport that the message and the finished composition are the prioritized site of study, my intent is to look at comics and their creative process as a “web of relations” (Miodrag 2010, p. 317). In this section I look at what Hannah Miodrag (2010) calls the “multifarious fragments” (p. 310) that constitute a comic: “panels, pictures, speech bubbles, captions” (p. 310). However, I also look at the creator’s recollection of the moment of inception, or the beginning of a creative idea. Kochalka (1999) states that understanding art is an understanding of “the process of focusing ourselves into a work of art” and how that process “condenses our experience into a super concentrated ultra vivid reality” (p. 11). If we hope to understand art in any form, the process is a pivotal component.

Of course, before moving into a discussion of this process, I need to clarify what I mean when I say “inception.” Many artists and writers are familiar with the question, “where do you get your ideas from?” What seems like a simple question is actually extremely difficult to answer as it asks composers to try to understand and unravel the origins of creativity, such as the inspiration behind a particularly unique novel, comic book, or painting. Many theorists, chiefly Jacques Derrida (date), have been highly critical of any attempt to conceptualize “origins.” Finding one origin only leads to an endless loop of trying to find the origin of that origin, and so on. In my discussion of production and composition surrounding the NC logo, I may refer to the word “origin,” though I mean it only in reference to the beginning or inception of an idea formed and created by a person, such as an artist or writer. In Inventions of Reading: Rhetoric and the Literary Imagination, Clayton Koelb (1988) states, “While we would be hard pressed to find the
ultimate and indisputable ‘origin’ of any work of fiction, we can talk quite intelligibly about the
beginning the author made in order to be able to write it” (p. 2).

For rhetoricians, this turn to the beginning, or origin, must include a discussion of
invention. When Aristotle characterized the rhetorical process, he identified five associated
terms: arrangement, style, memory, delivery, and invention (1991). Unlike the other five aspects
of the rhetorical process, “invention is the only one that directly addresses the content of
communication as well as the process of creation, thus dealing with one of the most visible parts
of published rhetorical performance, the content, and one of the most often invisible—the
process by which a writer produced that content” (Lauer 2004, p. 1-2). Specific to writing and
speaking, invention encompasses a process that typically happens at the early stages of
preparation and writing and is chiefly concerned with the rhetor’s contribution to writing or
speech. I would argue that invention becomes a more complex area of study when we include
comics and their “multifarious fragments” (Miodrag 2010, p. 310).

**Making Comics**

In order to get a better sense of the creative steps involved in comic book production, I created
an inclusive step-by-step visual of the creative process based on my own experience making
comic books (figure 13). I will review these five major components involved in the artistic
process within this section. After offering multiple definitions of comics in Chapter 2, it is
necessary to discuss the procedural steps taken to produce a printed comic, especially since the
NC logo was first created as part of a comic. First, I offer a step-by-step look at how comics are
made, then I discuss how these components, from the human creators to the images, work
together “in an ongoing chain of interrelation” (Miodrag 2010, p. 310).
Figure 12: The five major components of the comic creation process from the moment of inception to the edited and readable final copy of a comic book.

Comics are not typically conceived by a singular creator. This is something that neither McCloud (1993) nor Kochalka (1999) account for in their discussions of art and process. Based on the process I illustrate in figure 1, the creative process could, at a minimum, involve 5-7 different creators all working on the same comic book. However, I would once again argue that this is a unique phenomenon to the creative process involved in comics, because each member of the creative team is working on an entirely different portion of the overall composition. To illustrate the various components and roles within the creative process, I analyze the details of Valentine de Landro’s process for creating *Bitch Planet* and the NC logo that we discussed during an interview I conducted with de Landro in 2019.

**Idea/Conception**

As noted above, tracking down an idea, or “origin,” creates an endless cycle that I am not interested in as part of this project. However, I would like to consider that outside influences and inspirations do play a large role in the creative process. No composition lives in a vacuum. For example, in Chapter 2 I noted that pulp magazines influenced the creation of comic book
superheroes – Doc Savage, the man of Bronze, helped pave the way for Superman, the man of Steel (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz 2015, pp. 11-12). The origin of the NC logo similarly goes back in time to British prison attire from the late 19th and early 20th century (Taylor 2011, p. 497). As I stated in Chapter 1, the term “Bitch Planet” is the nickname given to the Auxiliary Compliance Outpost that is used as a prison for noncompliant women. Women who choose not to conform to the will of their patriarchal leaders by becoming the “perfect” wives and mothers are deemed “noncompliant” and unfit to be a member of society. These women are removed from their homes, and even their planet, and stripped of personal belongings before being given government-issued orange overalls branded with the NC logo in stark white lettering (Figure 14).

The prison uniform is the first place that readers see the NC logo within the world of Bitch Planet. As women arrive at the prison, the reader watches as prison guards hand them their new uniforms and force them to strip away any remaining elements of their personal clothing. One prisoner named Penelope remarks that the uniform she is given is barely large enough to cover her chest, but this is the only uniform that the prison will provide for her. The standard orange overalls with white NC lettering, in one uniform size, are meant to establish the government’s goal of reforming these women by removing all elements of their past, noncompliant identities, and humiliating them for their indiscretions.
I asked de Landro during our interview about the initial steps in his creative process for visualizing the uniforms and the NC logo that appears on those uniforms. With this question, I sought to explore the inspirations, resources, “labor practices, cultural values, and cultural positioning” (Gries 2015, p. 114-15) that de Landro considered as part of the NC logo itself. In other words, what inspired the design of the overalls and the stark, white NC that appears on the women’s prison attire?

de Landro states that he started with the design of the orange overalls as the basis of the uniform, but he wanted to add:

something a little more graphic to just place on the [uniform], rather than just putting them in orange jumpsuits. I didn’t want to necessarily do that. I came up with the idea of putting them in dungarees. Then, from there, I just wanted some sort of symbol. Then
tying that into the concept of being noncompliant, which Kelly Sue [DeConnick] and I had already established, and those letters were already floating around, I started just working on some sort of a logo, some sort of arrangement for the NC and in a way that would look like a stamp and also look like a brand to place on the uniform. It sort of just developed from there, really, to make something that would go on their dungarees when they were on Bitch Planet. (personal interview, 1/6/19)

de Landro says that the first major concern when beginning the creative process of the NC logo was to find “some sort of symbol to put on the prison uniforms,” which led him to the discovery of the broad arrow that “used to be on inmates’ uniforms so you could identify them as inmates” (personal interview, 1/6/19). So, de Landro’s initial concern as a creator was to design distinct prison uniforms that allow the reader to quickly grasp that the characters are inmates.

The broad arrow that de Landro references was specifically used on British prison uniforms from the late 19th and early 20th century (Taylor 2011, p. 497). The broad arrow was intentionally meant to humiliate prisoners by marking them as a government property (Figure 15). While the first official use of the broad arrow is somewhat contested, historian David Taylor (2011) traces the icon to early property markers from 1330 (p. 494). A document from 1330 clearly states that arrows from the King’s coat of arms were used on wine to mark ownership. However, using the broad arrow as a marker for government property didn’t become common practice until 1690 when it appeared as engravings on guns and on store signs (Taylor 2011, p. 496).
One of the most onerous uses of the broad arrow was in the New England colonies where the British Navy used it to mark timber: “During those times, the abundance of large shipbuilding-grade timber in North America was exploited by the British Royal Navy who exercised a form of eminent domain power by emblazoning the broad arrow mark, essentially three axe strikes resembling an arrowhead and shaft, on large ‘mast-grade’ trees destined for delivery to shipbuilders in England” (Taylor 2011, p. 496). Upset that the crown was taking their best timber, the colonists cut down all of the trees with the broad arrow and then placed the broad arrow symbol on smaller trees, less suited for shipbuilding. The ensuing skirmishes over these pine trees and what the British called the “Broad Arrow Policy” became known as the “White Pine War” (Taylor 2011, p. 497).

Branding prisoners as a means of dehumanization is not an uncommon occurrence in history. The textile conservator at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Lizou Fenyvesi (2006), notes that the use of stripes for prison uniforms, during the Holocaust and
beyond, is associated with making it easier for prisoners to stand out, but, also, “In European visual cultures, stripes have a long association with loss of freedom and their pejorative meaning goes back hundreds of years. Stripes were considered an unnatural pattern in medieval Europe” (Fenyvesi 2006, p. 351). Further, each uniform worn by victims of the Holocaust had a triangle that was meant to quickly and visually identify prisoner type based on color: “yellow triangle for Jewish prisoner; red for politicals, green for common criminals, black for asocials or Gypsies, pink for homosexuals, and purple for Jehovah’s Witnesses” (Fenyvesi 2006, p. 355). The uniforms and their accompanying symbols stripped any individualization or humanity from the prisoners. Psychologically, this would make it easier to control the prisoners while simultaneously creating an extremely visible means of identifying deviance.

The initial goal of de Landro’s logo design, then, was to create something that was immediately identifiable as part of a prison uniform while also signaling the loss of freedom and dehumanizing nature of the prison planet. To do this, de Landro tapped into a much larger tradition of marking prisoners with symbols meant to differentiate them. Indeed, de Landro states that the NC logo is intended to “distinguish and differentiate the women that were sent off to Bitch Planet from the ones that stayed” (personal interview, 1/6/19). At the Image Comics Expo in 2014, co-creator Kelly Sue DeConnick told the crowd that Bitch Planet was “born of a deep and abiding love for exploitation and women in prison movies of the ’60s and ’70s” (qtd. in Hennon 2014). On the prison world of Bitch Planet resides a holographic woman called “the Model.” She is not a prisoner but rather she “is supposed to be this ultimate representation of the subservient woman” (de Landro, personal interview, 1/6/19). The model appears in a nun’s head scarf and a skin-tight corset that reveals large, pink breasts. The model is sexualized while giving the appearance of virginity through religious attire (Figure 16).
In order to distinguish the prisoners of Bitch Planet from someone like the Model, de landro notes that he was focused “on just making sure that the cast was going to be distinct” (personal interview, 1/6/19). The use of the orange overalls with the NC logo stamped on them is a means of visually marking these women as different and “noncompliant” from the rest of the women in the story, especially the model. The NC logo blends the inspiration for prison-genre fiction with prison iconography, such as the broad arrow, and dehumanizing prison uniforms.

**Script**

As I move into a discussion of how comic art is created and how the NC logo is situated within the pages of a comic, we first have to look at the outlining and scripting stage. In the last three years I have written over 80 comic book scripts for clients ranging from DC Comics to Dark Horse, and even Amazon and Cartoon Network. I have worked with an average of eighteen different art teams that include editors, artists, inkers, colorists, designers, flatters, and letterers. I
mention this because, as I discuss the collaboration between artist Valentine de Landro and writer Kelly Sue DeConnick, I want to first note how the comics industry views the scripting process differently from other forms of written content. Like any creative process, most have their own methods. However, there are a few components to writing comics that are almost standard within the industry: 1) outlining; 2) scripting; and 3) dialogue.

For outlines and breakdowns, the writer typically works to plot story beats across multiple issues of a comic. By this I mean that instead of writing one continuous piece of prose, comics typically appear periodically in 20-30-page installments about once a month. Five to six individual issues are considered an arc (similar to a single season of a TV show) and are then compiled into a trade paperback (a printed collection of individual comics). This makes writing for the medium rather unique. Before beginning a script, I create handwritten outlines of the major moments, or beats, in each issue of the series:

![Handwritten outline example]

**Figure 16:** A photo from my personal notebook shows outlines that I create by hand for each comic script I write. These notes also include page layouts to help me better understand how the content can fit on each page of the printed comic.
Figure 17: A page from my personal notebook of an outline I created for a *Rick & Morty* comic, published by Oni Press in 2021.

Figures 17 and 18 illustrate the breakdown portion of my process. These are notes intended for my own personal use as I transition from these handwritten maps to the typed script. These outlines are malleable, hence the arrows and other marginalia I use to indicate additions to content or placement changes of pages. These notes also contain concepts for how to structure each individual page. While comics writing is a collaboration between the entire art team, the writer functions like a director, responsible for helping everyone else on the team see the direction and shape of the story. In Figure 17 above, you can see panel breakdowns that I was drawing while writing script notes. Oftentimes, my work is about making sense of the images in my head and translating them to the page for the artist, so it helps to understand how that content might best be represented on the actual page.

The outlining stage of writing also includes working with the art team to ensure that we are all headed in the same direction. In my interview with de Landro, I asked him about the process of working with writer DeConnick to build the world of *Bitch Planet*. de Landro stated:
As far as the story goes . . . we tend to sit down and talk about that a lot together. We’re both trying to plot it and come up with our larger . . . like how the story’s going to go, the larger arcs that are involved. The book is going to be broken up into volumes, so we want a story arc to begin and end within that one volume itself. So, we’ve done the work together as far as arranging how those events are going to happen, which volumes they’re going to happen in. Then [DeConnick] gets into the writing. She’s developing the story itself a little more in-depth to be able to script it and give the characters a voice. Then, as soon as her script is done, she’ll give that to me, and then I’ll do the layouts for the visual part of it and start finishing up the line art. (personal interview, 1/6/19)

Similarly, writer Ron Marz (2016), a comic book veteran with over 30 years of experience, equates this creative collaboration to “a jazz combo, or a basketball team; the individual players do their own thing, but riff off of each other to greater a greater whole. There's no true success if one player or piece is diminished. Part of doing your job is to help everyone else do their job” (n.p.).

It is extremely important to note that the audience for a comic script is not the reader of the finished comic book; the audience is the creative team. While McCloud (1993) is primarily concerned with how the comic audience will receive and understand the message of the final, composed comic, and Kochalka (1999) is invested in how and why artists create, very little attention has been given to how the scripting stage of comics is intended to help the artist interpret the story (Eisner 2008, p. 127). Will Eisner (2008) states that the script shapes the initial story through panel descriptions and page content in an attempt to “carry that idea from the mind of the writer to the illustrator” (p. 127). However, Eisner (2008) also notes that the goal of any creative team should be to “develop [a story] with words and imagery into a unified whole” (p.
This means that, when looking so distinctly at the writing process of a comic, Eisner wants to ensure that we do not forget that the written scripts are part of a larger “unified whole.” Each piece of the “whole” is necessary for the comic’s creation and eventual composition.

**Line Art and Creating the Page**

Previously, I discussed that the reader actively participates in making meaning from the comic book page, or the “unified whole.” This act of meaning-making on the part of the audience primarily occurs by the reader filling in the gap, or gutter, that exists between panels on the page. I also noted that readers are able to use their personal experience to fill in the gap between panels and make sense of content that is not explicitly visible on the page. But, before the audience participates in reading a finished page, how does the artist “take into consideration both the commonality of human experience and the phenomenon of our perception of it” (Eisner 2008, p.39)? According to Will Eisner (2008), the artist’s job is to “arrange the sequence of events (or pictures) so as to bridge the gaps in action” (p. 39). Scott McCloud (1993) tells us that the artist accomplishes this through the act of “closure”: “the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (p. 63). McCloud contends that everyone depends on the act of closure in comics, as creators and readers, and in daily experiences. Even “our perception of reality,” says McCloud (1993), “is an act of faith, based on mere fragments” (p. 62). The most well-traveled person still can’t see the entire world in a lifetime, yet we know Japan exists even without traveling there.

The comic artist, then, creates closure, and thereby meaning, through the skillful arrangement of panels on the page. A panel, also known as the “frame,” is the “structural support” of comics (Eisner 2008, p. 51). “The creation of the frame,” says Eisner (2008), “begins
with the selection of the elements necessary to the narration, the choice of a perspective from which the reader is allowed to see them, and the determination of the portion of each symbol or element to be included in the frame” (p. 42). McCloud (2000) claims that it is then the artist’s arrangement of these individual panels, or frames, that creates meaning as the panels move through time, hence McCloud’s description of comics as a “temporal map” (p. 206). The most common panel layout is one in which “the shape and proportion of the box remain rigid” (Eisner 2008, p. 44). This rigid shape was initially due in large part to the printing practice of comic strips in newspapers. The comic panel as rectangular and rigid was “a natural extension of the format” (Eisner 2008, p. 44). However, the shape and structure of panels now vary widely and a panel’s shape and size are used as storytelling elements: “a frame’s shape (or the absence of one) gives it the ability to become more than just a proscenium through which a comic’s action is seen: it can become part of the story itself. It can be used to convey something of the dimensions of sound and emotional climate in which the action occurs, as well as contributing to the atmosphere of the page as a whole” (Eisner 2008, p. 45).

When the panels are put together on the page, Barbara Postema (2013) claims that they create something new: “panels, by means of frames and gutters, combine on the comics page to create a synergy that goes beyond the content of the single panel” (p. 28). For Postema, this is how a comic makes meaning. The individual components of a singular panel – “images that signify by resemblance or a code such as gesture, or temporality, or color” (p. 28) – become significant only in relation to one another. This means that panels, frames, and gutters need to be considered in relation to one another in order to determine meaning. The page layout (where the artist places the panels and gutters), is a deliberate choice made by the comic artist, “which shows how integral the layout is to the signification,” or the “construction of meaning,” of the
entire, finished composition, or comic (Postema 2013, p. 30). Postema (2013) further notes that the decisions the artist makes in terms of page layout, and even how to structure the lines around panels, functions in the same way that punctuation might. For example, in figure 10 artist Francesca Fantini uses broken lines around the panel to indicate memories and flashbacks that break the typical narration that is taking place in real-time and portrayed with rigid, rectangular panels. Throughout *Artemis & the Assassin*, written by me and illustrated by Fantini, panels with broken borders are used to indicate the main character’s memories or flashbacks:

![Figure 18: Page 3 of *Artemis & The Assassin*, written by Stephanie Phillips with art by Francesca Fantini, and letters by Troy Peteri, published by AfterShock comics in 2020.](image-url)
Another way that panels work to create visual cues and meaning for the reader is through spacing, size, and placement. A long, tall panel, for example, like in Figure 20, indicates height and perspective.

![Figure 19: From A Man Among Ye #2 by Stephanie Phillips and Craig Cermak, published by Top Cow and Image Comics in 2020.](image)

Based on Eisner and McCloud’s explanation of panels and framing, we can argue that it is the artist’s responsibility to use these conventions to secure the reader’s attention and “dictate the sequence in which the reader will follow the narrative” (Eisner 2008, p. 40). Comics theorist Robert Harvey (1996) claims that “the selection of what is to be pictured is greatly influenced by the quantity of story material (how much exposition is required, how much action, what must be depicted in order to prepare for subsequent events, and so on) and by the available space” (p. 178). I would also note that the artist is considering how the reader will approach the page. For
example, Figure 21 showcases a page layout with panels that read left to right, as dictated by Western literacy conventions. Readers are trained to read one page at a time and the panels, the “temporal map,” guide the reader through the action.

![Figure 20: A sample of a comic page layout that showcases how a Western reader will read from left to right, following the red line through the page to interpret the content.](image)

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the many choices presented to an artist during the production of a comic page means that, along with considering how to create each page of *Bitch Planet*, artist Valentine de Landro needed to consider where and how the NC logo was going to live on the page of the comic and on the character’s clothing. For de Landro, this meant considering what the logo would look like as the characters moved and interacted with one another, stretching their clothing during action sequences, for example. As such, de Landro opted for a simple design that could be replicated across the pages and move with characters as they interact throughout the prison planet. The following is an excerpt from my interview with de Landro about his creative process:

**Phillips:** As an artist, how do you approach something like a logo, both in terms of where does the inspiration come from for a logo, [and] what are thoughts that you have to [consider] . . .? What [does] the process of starting that look like?
**de Landro:** I generally start by trying to understand where the logo’s going to live, I mean, where it’s going to be shown the most, how it’s going to be reproduced. There’s a lot of different things. I knew [the NC logo] was going to be small, so it’d have to be something that was going to have some weight to it. I wanted it to be distinguishable as an N and a C separately, but also have some sort of graphic element where it just looked like a shape. Those are things that I like to do when I make logos. But, generally, it’s just trying to figure out what the main use of it is going to be for and where it’s going to be … I wouldn’t have picked that pseudo-futuristic font with it if it wasn’t going to be a future-based book. So, things around the book led me into a direction already, and the logo just started to build itself from there. (personal interview, 1/6/19)

The creation of the logo, then, was dependent on the scripts and story provided by Kelly Sue DeConnick. The prisoners needed to be quickly identified, and the design had to be easily reproduced across hundreds of pages. de Landro considered both the practicality of creating a comic, as well as how the logo would best look on a prison uniform, when choosing the final design.

**de Landro** considered multiple variations of the NC logo before settling on the final, futuristic, block white lettering. The initial design for the NC logo was sketched in a notebook and consisted of about a dozen different variations of the logo (Figure 22):
Figure 21: A page from Valentine de Landro’s sketchbook showing early design concepts for the NC logo. Image provided by de Landro.

From the sketchbook designs, de Landro states that he moves to a process that is part digital and part “traditional” (personal interview, 1/6/19). By “traditional,” de Landro is referring to the tools involved in the creative process, such as pencil, pen, ink, and paper. When de Landro says that he works both traditionally and digitally, he means that he will create some artwork with these traditional tools, but then move to digital artwork to finish the page or design by adding additional embellishments digitally. As I discussed in the previous section regarding the writing process of a script, the process associated with a comics page is rather similar to scripting and can be broken into three main steps: 1) outline/thumbnail; 2) pencil; and 3) inks. Figures 23a, 23b, and 23c below showcase the process of an artist outlining the page – determining the
placement of important figures and details – and moving into the penciling process before finally placing thick, black inked lines over the pencils:

Figure 22a, 22b, 22c: The outlining, penciling, and inking stages of a comic page by Craig Cermak for *A Man Among Ye* (2020) published by Top Cow/Image Comics.
As de Landro indicates, the design of the NC logo was incredibly important when considering the amount of work needed on the interior artwork for *Bitch Planet*. Along with designing the logo, that logo would then need to appear on the prison uniforms for all of the characters in the story, thus drawn repeatedly by de Landro over multiple issues of the book. de Landro states that the logo’s appearance on the comic page was a major concern: “for me to add more detail to the inside of the NC would have made this book take even longer to come out… so just having a basic graphic element on their uniforms that I can distinguish from everything else, it helps to kind of keep things moving along and not spend too much time in too much fine detail, especially with the logo itself” (personal interview, 1/6/19). Thus, we can better understand how de Landro’s design decisions were impacted by the medium, or genre, of comics. As Gries (2015) states, genre plays an important role in analyzing production because, along with “institutional and other forces,” genre can, at least partially, dictate design (p. 116). In the case of the NC logo, the process of creating a monthly comic, which forces artists to draw anywhere from 20-22 pages per month, means that the design of the NC logo needed to be something easily replicated and quickly distinguished by readers.

Creating a singular page, and even each individual panel, is filled with a host of possibilities that ask the artist to make a series of decisions while working. Duncan, Smith, and Levitz (2015) summarize these choices as syntagmatic and paradigmatic choices (p. 110). Syntagmatic choice refers to “the process of selecting which panels to present from the possible consecutive progression of story images that could be placed on the page” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 110). Each panel, and each image within that panel (the syntagmatic) intersects with the paradigmatic choice, “the chosen images and all the images that could have made sense or communicated nearly the same meaning at the same point in the panel” (Duncan, Smith, and
Levitz 2015, p. 110). In other words, paradigmatic choices are what the artist chooses not to show on the page.

Every comic book artist is faced with a myriad of decisions that impact how the reader navigates the page and interprets the information. No two artists will plan and create a page in the same way. Each artist brings a unique style of narration and storytelling to the page, along with a unique artistic style. No two artists will approach the pages the same in terms of style or layout and each page’s unique layout impacts how the reader makes sense of the story based on different and distinct visual cues taken from the artwork.

**Color**

After a page is inked, as seen in figure 19c in the preceding section, it moves to the coloring process where another creator, typically not the line artist, adds color to the comic book. As was dictated by the available technology, early comic strips were printed only in black and white. Eventually a “four-color” printing process was introduced that utilized black, red, blue, and yellow inks. The use of color made the strips more appealing to readers, and helped make early superheroes stand out to prospective audiences (Duncan, Smith, and Lezitz 2015, p. 223). Thus, “the use of bold, primary colors has become synonymous with superheroes” (Duncan, Smith, and Lezitz 2015, p. 223). Now, color is used to express emotion and enhance the storytelling present on the page. As Caivano and López (2010) note, Western culture has made many shared associations about the meaning of certain colors – pink for girls, blue for boys, green is natural or biological, red is angry or alerting, black is sinister, white is clean, and so on (p. 3). In “How Colour Rhetoric is Used to Persuade: Chromatic Argument in Visual Statement” Caivano and López (2010) make the argument that color is persuasive based on these shared
cultural premises and to use color persuasively means accounting for the “previous predisposition of the audience” (p. 11).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) note that color is typically studied in relation to affect (p. 229). However, in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) make the argument that “color is used metafunctionally, and that it is therefore a mode within its own right” (p. 229). In essence, color is typically not studied independent of more obvious modes – typography, product design, architecture, etc. (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, p. 231). But, on its own, color can actually create action through its ability to “impress or intimidate,” keep the reader’s attention while reviewing a document, and even to help people “present themselves and the values they stand for” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, p. 229-30). Colors, then, can act independently of other fragments on the comic page to enhance and add meaning that was not previously perceptible.

Though not specifically about comics, Alberts and van der Geest (2011) conducted a study on the colors used by designers when creating websites to better understand audience perception of color. One website was presented to various different viewers in four different colors – black, red, blue, and green. Participants in the study then ranked the inherent trustworthiness of the website based on the color scheme, finding that blue rated the highest among study participants (p. 156). Further, Alberts and van der Geest (2011) decided to determine if their findings held if they changed the content of the website. Again, blue came back as the most “trustworthy” color tested (p. 157). While I provide only a brief summary of the study conducted by Alberts and van der Geest (2011), I mention it to highlight a specific example of the impact of color on audience perception. In comic books, color plays with these shared social premises and considers what the audience will read by presenting a particular color
or color combination. Like the line artists, the colorist has a set of decisions to make when coloring the page. Once again, Project Art Cred has worked with a host of different colorists to showcase how each individual colorist makes decisions and adds to the overall story and impact of the page. Using the same page of line art from artist Stephen Byrne, colorists from all over the world added their own unique style and interpretation to the page. Below are a few examples of the finished, colored pages:

Figure 23: Posted to Twitter by Project Art Cred (@cred_art), colorist Diana Sousa adds colors to a page by Stephen Byrne.
Figure 24: Posted to Twitter by Project Art Cred (@cred_art), colorist Beq adds colors to a page by Stephen Byrne.
As you can see from the above examples, each page is different. Color impacts how we read the main character (in some pages the character is a Black man, and others white), time of day, and mood. All of these elements are important in understanding how the reader will interpret the page based on the visual cues they are presented with. Similarly, de Landro made an overt and conscientious decision to make the original NC logo that appears on the prison uniforms a solid white. de Landro states that the color choice was about “trying to remember where [the logo’s] going to live” (personal interview, 2/6/19). By this, de Landro means considering that the logo is going to be placed on bright orange coveralls. The logo needed to be something that would stand out against the uniform color with relative ease, but not overpower the outfits or appearance of the characters. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, the solid white color of
the NC logo also made the logo easier for readers and fans to transform as tattoos and other forms of fan appreciation.

**Dialogue, Text, and Typography on the Comic Page**

Up to this point, I would like to note that there is a flaw in the way I have introduced and discussed the first four stages of comic creation and how the NC logo exists in this process. As new materialism would tell us, and as the comic process is demonstrating, all elements of the comic (the creators and the components on the page) work together to make meaning. This process is *not* linear, but rather a play between all elements simultaneously. In this project, I am limited by the ability to only write in a linear fashion, but, as I move into a discussion of text that will call back to my previous sections on script writing, line art, and color, I need to clarify this noticeable limitation. I previously noted that the dialogue written in a script (the space the dialogue and speech balloons need on the page, and the emotion of the text that each character is saying) dictates how the artist creates the page. Further, the dialogue is initially created as part of the scripting stage to accompany the action of each page. As a writer very familiar with the process of creating comics, I would also note that dialogue may be created as part of the initial scripting stage, though it is not finalized until after the art is created. Just as the dialogue and text influence the art, so too does the art influence the writer and ask the writer to work in tandem with the process to create meaning.

The dialogue stage, or lettering stage, is again carried out by another human creator on the art team. The writer writes the dialogue that appears in the script, but professional letterers use that script and the artist’s page to lay narration, captions, and dialogue over the artwork – another layer of meaning for the reader that helps solidify the bond between image and text that
comprises the composition of the comic. Barbara Postema (2013) claims that the purpose of text in a comic “is to fill the gaps left by the images, the layout, and the sequences” (p. 79). The text on a page appears “as captions, external or internal to the panels, but also as words that are part of the represented world (i.e., a newspaper headline, graffiti on a wall, or writing on a t-shirt). Most emblematic to comics, text can appear in the word balloon, which may be a speech balloon or a thought balloon” (Postema 2013, p. 82). For David Carrier (2000), this balloon is a “defining element of the comic” (p. 4). The word balloon, Carrier (2000) claims, is the element of the comic that “establishes a word/image unity” and “defines comics as neither a purely verbal nor strictly visual art form” (p. 4). What is so interesting about the word balloon is that it is still a part of the image, but also offers an immediate shortcut into a character’s mind through thought and dialogue (Postema 2013, p. 82).

In comics, unlike any other medium, the verbal and visual are both represented by marks on the page. Groensteen (2007) refers to this as the two “registers” of comics, or “the iconic and the linguistic” (p. 128). As we saw in chapter 2, there is a debate about how to best define comics based primarily on these two registers. The debate seeks to determine where each definition should place priority between the visual and the verbal. I would tend to agree with critics who posit that comics function only when both “registers” blend seamlessly (eg. Postema 2013; Carrier 2000; Groensteen, 2007). Robert Harvey (2005) calls this the “verbal-visual blend” and notes that this blend is what distinguishes comics from other kinds of images or pictorial narratives: “words and pictures blend to a achieve a meaning that neither conveys alone without the other” (“Describing” p. 19). Postema (2013) claims that the verbal and pictorial forms of communication are typically opposing, but come together “productively” in comics (p. 81).
Text and word balloons contribute to the meaning of the narrative by providing the reader with dialogue, narrative, character’s private thoughts, and even sound effects. Like the previous stages of comic creation, all text in a comic is accompanied by a host of decisions about placement, color, font, and design that enhance the reader’s engagement with the characters and plot. Thoughts, which typically occur inside of your head, and spoken dialogue, must now be given literal space on the comic book page. The use of text in comics represents an element of the composition that is specific to the medium – the text in comics reads as an image (Eisner 2008, p. 10). Kennenberg (2001) claims that text in comics works as “metanarrative,” meaning that the text – “and the borders that surround it, such as balloons or caption boxes – can provide information about the narrative, beyond the information in the grammatical content of the words and the order in which the objects on the page should be read” (p. 173). While text helps to literally provide the narrative of the story, the text also uses other codes and signals (visual cues) to tell the reader more information than could be gained through simply reading the content provided.

Along with the different styles of font and balloons that indicate sound, thought, and speech, text exists throughout a comic book as other components of the artwork, such as the NC logo seen on prisoner uniforms in Bitch Planet. The logo is an interesting use of text because it is an image created using letters, or a logotype (also referred to as a “logo” throughout this project). As Johnson et. al. (2017) state, logotypes are typically “letterform centric,” referring to “a word or phrase representing an organization,” and “logotypes instantiate brand” (p. 253). Johnson et. al. (2017) claim that “logotypes do the work of denotively identifying that which they represent,” allowing consumers to “attribute personality to letterforms” (p. 254). Google and Coca-Cola, for example, have readily identifiable logos that use type to help create brand identity. The Coca-
Cola font is recognizable even when the font is used to write a different word. The font has become intrinsically tied to the brand through extranarrative.

Though the “NC” is not part of a corporate logo like Coca-Cola, I mention the use of logotypes in corporate identity to indicate one of de Landro’s concerns when creating the NC logo for *Bitch Planet*. The NC has become the logo and image most associated with the comic series. As de Landro explained in our interview, the publisher, Image comics, does not invest much in advertising their books (personal interview, 1/6/19). de Landro states, “I think the lion’s share of the marketing is on us. I think we’re responsible for major promotions” (personal interview, 1/6/19). de Landro claims that he and Kelly Sue DeConnick had no intention of creating a logo that would be reimagined so fervently beyond the pages of the comic (something I will discuss in detail in chapter 4). The intention was to both create something that was clearly a part of the prison uniform, easily replicated in the pages of the comic and to create something that would help serve a marketing purpose by focusing on a main theme of the comic – noncompliance (personal interview, 1/6/19). The “pseudo-futuristic” font chosen by de Landro was intended to help readers identify that the book is in fact “a future based book” (personal interview, 1/6/19). These considerations about text and logotype clearly factored into the creative process and intent behind creating the NC image with a specific font and characteristic that is tied to the overall plot of *Bitch Planet*.

**Publication and Distribution**

While I have tried to do justice to the process of creating a comic book in as much detail as this project allows, I must note that there are a few missing pieces that have not been properly covered. Editors, designers, printers, retailers, and publishers all play a large role in creating the
comic and actualizing the comic as a finished, printed composition. These various roles range from editing the written comic book and artwork, to marketing, printing, digitally compiling all components of the book, and even selling the book to readers. The purpose of the comic book company, such as Image Comics, the publisher of *Bitch Planet*, is to “craft a media product for public consumption” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 267). An editor is hired to oversee a project and keep track of the many human contributors to the book. In many places, the various human contributors involved in the process of creating a comic have been referred to as an “assembly line” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 268). As one portion of the comic book page is completed, such as pencils, the page moves down the line to another artist to ink the page, then on to colors, etc. While the term “assembly line” has often been hailed as derogatory by many creators in the field, diminishing the amount of craft required to create a page, the term refers to the process that publishers use in order to pump out product on a regular basis. This process is dictated by a corporate need to consistently generate revenue. Thus, before the comic book or the NC logo could reach the hands of a reader, there are many steps in the publication and distribution process that are once again unique to the medium of comics.

For comic readers and creators, Wednesday is a day of particular importance. For as long as I can remember, Wednesday has always been “new comic book day,” or the designated day every week that a host of new titles appear on store shelves around the world. Each week, a publisher has a range of titles that arrive at comic shops and booksellers. The comic books go from finished composition to the shelf typically through a process called direct-market distribution (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 278): “the direct market essentially works like a subscription. Comics publishers solicit orders on soon-to-be-printed comics. The shop owners then place orders with the publishers before the publisher takes the solicited book to print”
(Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, p. 278). This means that publishers can limit the print run of a book based on demand, as well as ensuring that enough copies are printed for shops and readers. While there are some companies and publishers that are changing the landscape of how we sell and read comics (primarily looking at digital platforms), the direct-market has long been responsible for the distribution of comics to specialty stores around the world.

**A Web of Fragmented Relations**

Once printed and distributed, the final composition that reaches the reader is typically 20-40 pages of story printed on flimsy, glossy paper. The reader makes sense of this composition only because the script, line art, colors, and text are working together cohesively. What I have employed in this chapter is different strategies for looking at the “complex system” that is comics; however, “one must keep in mind the ‘global coherence’ of how the code systems relate to one another” (Postema 2013, p. 4). We have heard throughout this chapter that comics are referred to as fragmented. Each section of this chapter represents a fragment of the final composition and explores the labor of production required to create that fragment. “Comics are inherently fragmented” says Barbara Postema (2013), “and many comics exploit or echo this fragmentation in their narration. The gaps in comics continuously ask to be filled, which is one of the main reasons why comics are so engaging, so immersive: they foreground the process of narration and invite the reader to participate…” (p. 125). Dylan Horrocks (2004) equates the work of a comic to a playground where an artist and art team creates a world to play in and understand. The shape and design of the playground is determined by the artist (creative team) and “allows us to see viewers, readers and users of art as active, interactive participants, rather than passive recipients of the artist’s message” (Horrocks 2004, n.p.). Humans are not the only
element of Horrocks’ playground with agency. Since the reader, artist, and fragmented components of a comic all contribute to the meaning-making process, where can we find and place agency within this complex “web of relations”?

In Bruno Latour’s (1999) Pandora’s Hope, Latour argues that nonhumans are full-fledged actors that create meaning through collectives with, and independent of, their human counterparts (p. 174). These nonhuman actors are not mastered by us, even if we create them, nor do they have mastery over us (Latour 1999, p. 176): “instead, humans are transformed by the relations they enter into with nonhumans just as nonhumans are transformed as they enter into relation with humans” (Gries 2015, p. 73). For example, Latour (1999) asks us to consider the relationship between a person and a gun. Analyzing a slogan used by those in favor of control, “guns kill people,” and the response from the NRA, “guns don’t kill people; people kill people,” Latour notes that in each conception of the gun, the person, and where agency lies, this discussion misses an important third option: “the creation of a new goal that corresponds to neither agent’s program of action” (p. 178). Trying to understand whether the gun or the citizen is the actor in this situation erases the possibility that both the gun and the citizen change when in relation to one another. “It is neither people nor guns that kill,” says Latour (1999). The “responsibility for action must be shared among the various actants” (Latour 1999, p. 180). It is the relationship between both the human and nonhuman in this example that creates something entirely new: “a good citizen becomes a criminal, a bad guy becomes a worse guy; a silent gun becomes a fired gun, a new gun becomes a used gun, a sporting gun becomes a weapon” (Latour 1999, p. 180). The goals of the gun and the citizen in Latour’s example are not fixed. These goals react and change based on their relationship to one another, and allow them to become a hybrid – “’someone, something’ else” (Latour 1999, p. 180).
I mention Latour’s example of the gun to help articulate that all of the fragmented elements of the comic, human and nonhuman, are entering into a relationship with one another. The finished composition (the comic) is not the act of a singular creator, or even a singular element of the creation. Once these fragments enter into a relationship with one another, they become something entirely new. I am advocating here for a view of the creative process and the creation of a comic book that includes both nonhuman and human actors equally. Bogost (2012) states that “we need not discount human beings to adopt an object-oriented position – after all, we ourselves are of the world as much as musket buckshot and gypsum and space shuttles. But we can no longer claim that our existence is special as existence” (p. 8). In viewing the creative process through a new materialist lens, I don’t intend to lose the human readers or creators, but analyze them in relation to the nonhuman fragments that compose a comic book.

As we will see in chapter 4, readers interact with these fragments and with creators in order to create, repurpose, and re-compose the artwork and narratives presented by the original composition and production, particularly through the proliferation of the NC logo in the fandom surrounding *Bitch Planet*. Though this project is looking specifically at the NC logo as a site of study, the logo is best understood when placed in relation to the other fragments of a comic. The logo is one fragment, but, as demonstrated in this chapter, a comic functions by relating these individual fragments into a unified whole. The NC logo exists within the pages of a comic book, though chapter 4 will explore how the logo leaves the pages of the comic and becomes something new, divorced from the original production and composition.
CHAPTER 4:
FANS, FANDOMS, & TRUE BELIEVERS:
HOW THE NC LOGO LEFT THE PAGES OF BITCH PLANET

“The characters would be the kind of characters I could personally relate to; They’d be flesh and
blood, they’d have their faults and foibles, they’d be fallible and feisty, and – most important of
all – inside their colorful, costumed booties they’d have feet of clay.”

-- Stan Lee, Origins of Marvel Comics

Note to Reader: Some images in this section were previously published in the comic book
Bitch Planet by Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine de Landro. All images are shared with
permissions. Permissions can be found in Appendix A.

The previous chapter looked at the production and composition of comics, situating the
NC logo in those processes. In this chapter, I first analyze how the logo moves from the pages of
Bitch Planet and into the fandom by analyzing how and why fans gravitated towards Bitch
Planet and used the comic to create a new, inclusive fandom. Second, I discuss the emergence of
the NC logo as a tattoo within the fandom that Bitch Planet readers created for themselves. I
accomplish this by analyzing interviews with fans who have the NC logo tattooed on their
bodies. My goal is to understand 1) how the logo moves from the comics to the fandom; and 2)
how that movement reflects the meaning-making and rhetorical agency of images such as the
logo. The contents of this chapter are reviewed through three lenses, based on the seven
processes recognized by Gries (2015):
1. **Transformation**: This process pays close attention to “how a circulating image changes in terms of design, form, medium, materiality, genre, and function as it enters into new associations” (Gries 2015, p. 117). Transformation also looks at the ability for an image to circulate “long after the original designer’s distribution efforts” (Gries 2015, p. 119).

2. **Circulation and Distribution**: While distribution is “deliberate activity” that involves “intentional strategies deployed to disseminate an actualized image,” circulation refers to an image moving in and out of networks and assemblages “beyond a designer’s control” (Gries 2015, p. 119-20). These two processes are grouped together by both Gries and myself because looking at the intentional activity to spread and disseminate a visual often causes the unintentional act of circulation beyond the creator’s intention.

3. **Collectivity and Consequentiality**: As humans and nonhumans enter into association – e.g. humans interacting with the noncompliant logo – “collectives emerge” (Gries 2015, p. 124). This association, or collective, then “generates consequences via its divergent associations and thus becomes meaningful throughout its rhetorical life” (Gries 2015, p. 124). Again, I have put these processes in conversation with one another to help map the formation of a collective and the subsequent consequences spurred by that association. These processes shaped the interviews I conducted with fans and *Bitch Planet* co-creator and artist Valentine de Landro (Table 4):
Table 4: Material processes identified by Laurie Gries (2015) in Still Life with Rhetoric that appear in this chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Processes of Visual Rhetoric</th>
<th>Sample Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Transformation                        | • Where did you first see the NC logo?  
                                           • Have you seen the NC logo anywhere other than the comic book?  
                                           • Why did you decide to get the tattoo of the NC?  
                                           • Does the tattoo mean the same thing to you now as when you first got it? |
| Circulation & Distribution            | • Have you encountered the NC logo in any place that has surprised you?  
                                           • What do you think it was doing there? |
| Collectivity & Consequentiality      | • How long have you had the NC tattoo?  
                                           • Was this your first tattoo?  
                                           • Do you think having this tattoo changes you?  
                                           • Does the tattoo change your relationship with your body (does it change your body)?  
                                           • After [X amount of time] with the NC tattoo, does it mean the same thing to you now that it did when you got it?  
                                           • Socially and politically, it’s a really interesting time to have this tattoo. Was your decision to get the tattoo prompted by any social or political events?  
                                           • Have you seen the logo used by any social or political groups? Why do you think these groups use the logo? |

In order to understand how and why the NC logo moved from fictional prison garb onto the skin of readers, I must consider the impact that an intersectional feminist, science-fiction comic book had on the comics fandom when it was released in 2014. As such, this chapter
follows the NC logo as it circulates into the fandom, appears as a tattoo on the body of fans within that fandom, and then spurs action as a transformed and agentive image, divorced from its original source material and intention. In chapters 2 and 3 I discussed the participatory nature of comics as a positive and unique aspect of the medium. In order to better understand why the NC logo matters to fans and how it helped to build and maintain a fandom, however, I must first offer a more nuanced perspective and critique of that very same participatory culture.

**Who Gets to Participate?**

Featuring a diverse array of female characters in terms of body shape, sexual orientation, gender identification, and skin color, Kelly Sue DeConnick stated in a 2014 interview that *Bitch Planet* is an attempt to take a genre she loves and give the characters an agency they had previously lacked in other prison-based narratives. Comics tend to “put forth salacious images” (DeConnick qtd. in Hennon 2014), particularly of women. *Bitch Planet* demonstrates that comics can be broader and more inclusive.
For example, Figure 27 depicts Penny, one of the main characters from *Bitch Planet*, as she arrives on the prison outpost reserved for unruly women. In Penny’s case, she is sent to *Bitch Planet* for a plethora of reasons, including being too angry, too fat, too black, and not *woman* enough. While the guards on Bitch Planet try to reform Penny by convincing her that she could be better (particularly skinnier and prettier), Penny thwarts their efforts and takes pride in her appearance and identity. This is particularly important in both the story of *Bitch Planet* and the comics fandom because Penny does not *look* like a typical comic book character. Many popular comics with female protagonists feature the main character scantily clad and in compromising positions. Many popular female comic characters, such as Red Sojna, Witchblade, or Taarna, can be seen riding into battle in little more than a metal bra and thong for protection. It is important
to note that part of the work that *Bitch Planet* accomplishes for its fandom is to offer visual representations of diverse women not typically depicted within the medium.

It is important to further consider that *Bitch Planet* is situated in an industry and a larger group fraught with issues concerning who gets to participate in this shared space, or fandom. Up to this point, I have discussed the exciting, interactive possibilities that comics offer to audiences. However, that interactivity is heavily contested and monitored in a way that makes the feminism inherent in *Bitch Planet* novel and unique to the comic book industry. Indeed, at the beginning of the 1990s, DC Comics conducted market research that showed their average reader was 24 years-old and male (Round 2010, p. 23). From 1993-2013 a sample of mainstream superhero comics revealed that “females were less than one-quarter of the characters and drawn in about one-quarter of the panels” (Cocca 2014, p. 6). “Black, Latina, and Asian female superheroes are even more underrepresented,” and the minimal portrayals that do exist are usually accompanied by “racial and gendered stereotypes” (Cocca 2016, p. 4). Further, these female characters are typically supportive, romantic interests to the main character and are more often sexually objectified as they appear “in revealing attire,” or completely nude (Cocca 2016, p. 4).

In *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, Carolyn Cocca (2016) states that reducing these female characters to objects means that their story is not being told, “empathy for the group is less likely, and that group’s power is subverted” (Cocca 2016, p. 6). If these stories continuously show women and girls in supportive roles and are “not agents of their own lives,” these narratives only “reinforce or foster societal undervaluing of women and girls” (Cocca 2016, p. 6). Comics, written and created primarily by male creators, specifically target a male
audience. Comics’ continued underrepresentation of women only works to underpin their
devaluing in society and obscure narrative by, for, and about women and minorities.

Comics writer Gail Simone further argues that most female characters meet a violent end
and are often shown as “being killed, maimed or depowered” (Simone 1999, n.p.). In 1999 Gail
Simone created a website called Women in Refrigerators that was used to house an extensive list
of all of the violent deaths of female characters in comics. In an opening statement on the
homepage of the website, Simone (1999) states, “this is a list I made when it occurred to me that
it’s not that healthy to be a female character in comics… These are superheroines who have been
either depowered, raped or cut up and stuck in a refrigerator” (Simone 1999, n.p.). Referring to
Green Lantern issue #54 where the main character’s girlfriend is chopped up by a villain and
stuffed in a refrigerator, Simone’s purpose in compiling her list on Women in Refrigerators was
to ask why women were constantly killed violently and tragically as merely replaceable plot
devices. If we consider both Simone (1999) and Cocca’s (2016) arguments about the roles for
women in comics, then, we are left with two dominant portrayals: 1) women as replaceable
cannon fodder who are easily killed in order to advance the development of the male protagonist;
or 2) women are sexual objects for both male characters and male readers.

With a long tradition of excluding and hypersexualizing women, participation within
comic book fandoms is not always seen as open to everyone. In 2016, Marvel writer Chelsea
Cain portrayed the character of Mockingbird wearing a t-shirt that said “ask me about my
feminist agenda” and was subsequently harassed both on and offline by members of the comics
community claiming that Cain and her feminism don’t belong. Cain stated in her personal blog
that one user on Twitter commented, “Thanks, @chelseacain for ruining my favorite character
with your feminist crap” (Cain 2016, n.p.). In an attempt to silence the voices of women, people
of color, and LGBTQ creators and characters, a group calling themselves “Comicsgate” formed in 2017 with the singular belief that this kind of diversity is “ruining comics” (Berlatsky 2018, n.p.). As the self-professed gatekeepers of the industry, Comicsgate wants to continue the tradition of a singular, white, heterosexual male fandom, creating comics devoid of any political (i.e. leftist or liberal) agenda. Since the group’s inception, many of comics’ top creators have banded together to properly label Comicsgate a hate group (Berlatsky 2018, n.p.).

Couple the Comicsgate campaign against diversity with the overarching political climate in the U.S. that has, culminating in the 2016 election, given rise to a racist and sexist president, it’s clear that the emergence of a blatantly feminist comic book like *Bitch Planet*, in the words of co-creator Valentine de Landro, “touched on a certain pulse” (personal interview, 1/6/19). In my interview with de Landro, we discussed both U.S. politics and the Comicsgate movement within the comics fandom. de Landro claims that, at least in part, *Bitch Planet* is “really trying to push the idea that there’s enough room in the industry for our book. We just want to make sure that the ideas and the stories that we would like to see and we would like to enjoy have enough legitimate room, like actual space to thrive and build a community around as well” (personal interview, 1/6/19). Indeed, out of the nine fan interviews I conducted, five interviewees noted that they are not regular comic book readers. Three interviewees specifically expressed that *Bitch Planet* was the first comic book they read and that it served as a gateway into the fandom, while four interviewees noted that they were already interested in comics prior to reading *Bitch Planet*. Two out of these four, however, expressly stated that *Bitch Planet* was the first comic book that made them feel like they might have a space in the comic book community where they belong. I intentionally used the word “might” in the previous sentence because both of these interviewees noted that while *Bitch Planet* has pushed back against a predominantly white, male, heterosexual
fandom, there is still plenty of work to be done in creating an inclusive and diverse community for fans and creators. “We’re kind of prying our fingers around the door” states Participant 1 (personal interview, 1/26/19), “but we haven’t opened it yet.”

As a member of the Bitch Planet fandom sporting the NC logo as a tattoo, Participant 1 is also a professional costume designer who has created costumes for shows like Supergirl and Penny Dreadful: City of Angels. Participant 1’s perspective as a fan, as well as a professional costume creator, is that the industry still has a long way to go in order to create a more accepting and diverse space. While Bitch Planet is a strong start, Participant 1 states, “it is definitely getting better in increments… some cons you go to and you’re like ’oh, this is a breath of fresh air. I feel more represented. There are more people here. There’s actually women here… awesome!’ And then there’s other cons where it’s just, ’do you know a woman? Are you aware we exist? I’m not sure…” (personal interview, 1/26/19). Further, Participant 1 notes that the “power structure” of comics could be driving many potential fans away from the medium:

I meet a lot of people, especially women, who are like, “I don’t really like comics,” and this and that. And it’s like, “well, do you not like comics, or do you just not like the comics you’ve read?” Because that’s two different things. Because at times either you’re reading badly written comics, or you’re reading comics that don’t represent you. And you can only read those stories for so long before you’re like, “can I just have one that I feel connected to?” That’s what we’re all here for. (personal interview, 1/26/19)

Similarly, Participant 2, an associate professor, states that, despite an interest in comics prior to Bitch Planet, “I had never felt spoken to by a comic book in this way” (personal interview, 1/30/19). Or, in the words of Participant 3, whose first comic book was Bitch Planet, discovering
the comic book series was so exciting because “it was the first time where I was like… oh my God, there’s somebody writing these for me” (personal interview, 2/2/19).

Whether the interviewee was new to comics or an already established reader, the interviews I conducted all revealed a feeling of isolation from the comics fandoms – an isolation that felt somewhat lifted by the inclusive nature of *Bitch Planet*’s storyline and diverse visibility. Participant 4 notes that it is highly unusual to see a book that has “women of color on the cover” (personal interview, 1/23/19). As a comic book reader, Participant 4 states that she came to comics later in life because, growing up, comics were dominated by “gross dudes” who made it clear that women were not tolerated in this space (personal interview, 1/23/19). Even finding a love for comics as an adult, Participant 4 claims the need to wade through “gatekeeping” in order to enjoy a comic convention or feel like a legitimate member of the community: “so much of the mainstream comic community is based on X-Men and Marvel. It’s still very much those are the dominant cultures, and it’s like if it doesn’t become a Netflix television show, people aren’t going to necessarily go out and find it unless they’re digging further” (personal interview, 1/23/19).

de Landro is proud of the work that *Bitch Planet* has accomplished to help open doors for new readers and even creators by pushing back against these dominant stereotypes about the medium:

Comics is more than just superheroes, that comics itself is a medium, and it’s a storytelling medium that is very versatile. It can tell a number of different stories easily, and sometimes better than you can in other media. It’s why I love comics. It’s why I love the medium as a storyteller. I think now that… different voices now are coming out and starting to expand the industry really shows off what it’s capable of as a storytelling
medium. Yes, it does start to push back on your standard superhero fare that used to dominate the industry a few years ago, but I think that’s a good thing… I’m happy to be, in any way, shape or form, part of something that helps this industry survive and continue to grow… (personal interview, 2/1919)

Written by a woman and drawn by a Black man, *Bitch Planet* makes room for diverse characters, fans, and creators. This is incredibly important given the dominance in the industry of stories developed by heterosexual, white, male creators. In 2018 a comics journalist named Tim Hanley conducted a study on the diversity of creative teams in the comic industry, focusing predominantly on the big two publishers, DC and Marvel Comics. Gathering his data from comic book credits appearing from July through December 2018, Hanley found that “DC Comics released 391 new comic books featuring 3,476 creators: 2,877 male, 597 female, and 2 non-binary” (Hanley 2018, n.p.). During this six-month period, women and non-binary creators accounted for 17.2% of the creators at DC.

![Figure 27: A chart showing the percentage of credits attributed to male creators versus female creators during a 6 month period at DC Comics. Data collected by Tim Hanley (2018).](image-url)
During the same timeframe, Marvel released “486 new comics with 4781 credited creators: 4002 male, 777 female, and 2 non-binary” (Hanley 2018, n.p.). Female and non-binary creators constituted 16.3% of the creators at Marvel during this six-month period.

![Chart showing the percentage of credits attributed to male creators versus female creators during a 6 month period at Marvel Comics.](image)

**Figure 28:** A chart showing the percentage of credits attributed to male creators versus female creators during a 6 month period at Marvel Comics. Data collected by Tim Hanley (2018).

It is also important to note that these figures are counting credits and not one, individual creator. For example, if writer Kelly Thompson works on five books a month, she is counted five times in the tally created by Hanley. Also important is that the non-binary creators listed in this report could be the same creator working at both DC and Marvel.

Hanley (2018) notes that he began tabulating comic book credits in 2011, when only around 10% of credits were attributed to women. While that number from 2011 to 2018 rose about 6-7%, these numbers clearly indicate that de Landro and the fans interviewed for this project are reacting to a very blatant discrepancy – a discrepancy that is perhaps more palpable in comic book fandoms than it might be in other industries given the public and visible nature of the medium and its fans. When fans, characters, and creators are predominantly homogenous in terms of race and gender, pushing against such a strongly entrenched status quo can feel like moving a boulder up a mountain. For this reason, many of my study participants noted that they
have never even attempted to attend fan events, such as comic conventions. However, Participant 1 states that this erasure of women and people of color from events and fandoms means that “we can forge a community in which we have a place” (personal interview, 1/26/19).

Forging a New Fandom

While fandoms have led to a thriving, participatory culture, culminating in conventions and fan-based creations, such as the magazines and fan fiction I discussed in Chapter 2, that same fandom has internal hierarchies and unspoken rules for membership that often alienate women and minorities. In my interview with Participant 1, for example, she notes that the fandom tends to discriminate against content that women and girls gravitate towards: Participant 1 states that the mindset of most male fans is that “if a lot of young girls like it, then we must all hate it” (personal interview, 1/26/19). Kristina Busse (2017) uses the example of the Twilight saga’s introduction to San Diego Comic Con (SDCC) in 2009 to further highlight the ways that female fans are discriminated against and seen as outcasts by the larger, “gatekeeping” fandoms. The emergence of Twilight content at SDCC resulted in an influx of young, female fans that “caused discontent” because “the fannish object itself was dismissible, and the fans’ new fan status and their modes of engagement were suspect” (Busse 2017, p. 177). Other SDCC attendees mocked the Twilight fans by parading near the Twilight fan events with signs saying things like, “Twilight ruined comic-con. Scream if you agree!” (Busse 2017, p. 177). Busse (2017) notes that this case is particularly interesting because it is a blatant display of “fan policing” and “at every level of dismissal, gender plays a central part” (p. 178). Instead of simply referring to female Twilight attendees as fans, for example, other fans generated the term “fangirl” to expressly other and belittle both the fans and the content they are fans of, making gender a central reason for dismissal (Busse 2017, p. 178).
The differentiating between true fans and, in this example, women and girls identifying as fans of the Twilight franchise, establishes that there is internal policing over what kind of content fans can and should like. This issue does not only apply to the Twilight franchise, but is a clear display of fan hierarchies that intentionally disparage media that appeals specifically to women and girls. Busse (2017) notes that “affect and forms of fannish investment get policed along gender lines, so that obsessively collecting comic books or speaking Klingon is more acceptable within and outside of fandom than is creating fan vids or cosplaying. Even the same behaviors get read differently when women do it: sexualizing celebrities, for example, is accepted and expected among men, but is quickly read as disgusting or inappropriate when done by women” (pp. 178-79). Thus, we can also read that some fan activities, such as cosplaying or writing fan fiction, are gendered activities that are primarily attributed to female fans and then looked down on and mocked by male fans who make up the majority. These hierarchies, says Busse (2017), operate “by finding someone who is more unusual, less mainstream, more out there” in order to “raise their own fan status” (p. 184). This means that members of a dominant fandom are asserting their own status as fans by belittling and alienating anyone seen as a threat, or less of a fan.

Many females and minorities who identify as part of a fandom are familiar with the need to prove their loyalty and knowledge about a particular fanbase to these male fans. In these instances, it is not enough to simply enjoy a franchise, but women and minorities must know as much or more than their male counterparts to reach the level of acceptance into these fan-made spaces. Even creators, such as Leah Williams, a Marvel writer with a long history of working on comics like X-Men and The Totally Awesome Hulk, have been asked to prove her “nerd credentials”: in a 2017 post on Twitter, Williams displayed a screencap taken from a
conversation on a dating app where a male messaged her to say, “so you like dogs and comics eh? Let’s see if you’re a true fan… Have you heard of Squirrel Girl?” (Williams, 2017). Williams posted the screen cap with the accompanying caption, “you can literally be on the Marvel payroll and a dude will still try to test your nerd credentials” (Williams, 2017). If identifying as a member of these fandoms means jumping through hoops to prove these credentials to the gatekeepers, or “fan police,” it’s no wonder these spaces are not seen as open or accepting to new members. And, when these fandoms have been perpetually dominated by heterosexual, white men, the people turned away and excluded from these groups are predominantly women, people of color, queer, and disabled minorities.

Alienating members through fandom policing can have negative implications for those excluded from these spaces. In a 2016 study called “Are You ’Fan’ Enough? The Role of Identity in Media Fandoms,” Samantha L Groene and Vanessa E. Hettinger claim that “social rejection (or a threat to one’s identification within a group) often has negative implications, including: decreased performance on intellectual tasks, decreased self-regulation, and negative emotions” (p. 326). Conversely, acceptance in a group can result in benefits and “positive rewards” (Groene & Hettinger 2016, p. 326). Groene & Hettinger (2016) tested these assertions by analyzing members of the Harry Potter and Twilight fandoms. Participants were asked to take a test that assessed their knowledge of their fandom. These tests then gave participants scores that either affirmed their commitment and place in the fandom, or threatened their “fan” status (ranking participants highly for doing well, or low for performing poorly). After the testing and scoring, participants were then asked to write a creative essay about their fandom (Groene & Hettinger 2016, pp. 328-331). Fans who received “affirming feedback had their status as a fan validated” and, in turn, “exerted significantly more effort and performed better on the essay task”
(Groene & Hettinger 2016, p. 333). Fans who “received threatening feedback, and were thus ‘rejected’ from their ingroup” demonstrated lower performance and exerted less effort on the essay task (Groene & Hettinger 2016, p. 333).

The positive and negative reinforcements attributed to belonging (or not) to a specific group are rooted in many fans’ social identification with specific fandoms. Performing low on the essay portion in Groene & Hettinger’s (2016) study is not surprising for fans that felt as if the test was threatening a portion of their identity. “Social identity,” states Groene & Hettinger (2016), “is the portion of an individual’s self-concept that is derived from his or her membership in social groups” (p. 326). Fans may alter “aspects of their self-expression, including, but not limited to, choices of clothing, hairstyles, and accessories, in an attempt to construct a social identity representative of their subscription to a particular media fandom” (Groene & Hettinger 2016, p. 326). Fans, then, place great importance on incorporating their fandom into their “self-concept” (Groene & Hettinger 2016, p. 326). Elizabeth Cohen and Anita Atwell Seate (2017) claim that a self-concept tied to fandom is often associated with “self-esteem, empowerment, entertainment, self-fulfillment, and a sense of social integration and community” (p. 193). These fandoms “can unite disparate social groups and serve as a gateway to civic engagement and cultural production” (Cohen & Seate 2017, p. 193).

Being a member of a fandom can have positive and rewarding benefits for members, while exclusion from fandoms can have an adverse impact on identity and even behavior. Excluding or, at the very least, making membership more difficult for women and minorities, negatively impacts the way these fans interact and engage with media. With the emergence of Bitch Planet, however, fans were able to use the book to create an ingroup. An ingroup is a smaller group, or fandom, that falls within a larger group. For instance, comics may be the large,
overarching umbrella fandom, but an ingroup is a distinct entity under that umbrella, such as a fandom formed around a specific comic book or character; “just as sports fans identify not only as fans of a general sport, but more specifically with a specific sports team” (Groene & Hettinger 2016, p. 325). *Bitch Planet* gives comic fans, and newcomers to the medium, an ingroup to identify with that provides the illusive sense of acceptance that was often withheld from other ingroups, and even the larger umbrella fandom of “comics.” For example, in an interview with Participant 5, a fan who identifies as somewhat new to comics, she states that before *Bitch Planet* she did not have a sense of belonging to a particular group within comics or otherwise. After discovering *Bitch Planet* and getting the NC tattoo, however, Participant 5 states, “I guess now it puts me in a community, which is really cool, of women that are like-minded, which is not something you get in Salt Lake very often” (personal interview, 1/23/19).

For Participant 5, the NC tattoo helped visibly showcase her belonging to a specific ingroup. Growing up in Salt Lake City, Utah, Participant 5 notes that she never felt a sense of belonging from a city that is “very Mormon and very religious” (personal interview, 1/23/19). Not identifying as Mormon or religious, Participant 5 claims, “I’m already noncompliant in that way” (personal interview, 1/23/19). Finding the *Bitch Planet* fandom, then, meant finding acceptance for being “noncompliant,” something Participant 5 says translates for her beyond the pages of the comic. “I did enjoy the story,” says Participant 5, “but the message of noncompliance stood out more to me” (personal interview, 1/23/19). Similarly, Participant 6 states that getting the tattoo of the NC logo was about the social aspects of the fandom more than the story *Bitch Planet*: “I think it was less the tattoo itself and me getting it and more having seen the community that was out there and having a kind of close-knit group of women friends. We were all kind of experiencing the same stuff together…” (personal interview, 1/27/19). In fact,
all of the fans I interviewed for this study claim that the message of noncompliance transcends the original source material and that their investment in the group has moved beyond the storyline created by de Landro and DeConnick for the comic book series *Bitch Planet*.

In my interview with de Landro, I asked him about the logo moving from the pages of the comic to help form a fandom, or in-group. de Landro claims that the logo and the fandom are personal for each individual and have taken on a life of its own beyond his initial intention for the design:

> The [logo]… it’s supposed to mean one thing, but outside of the book it means something completely different. So now I don’t necessarily see it in the context of the book anymore. The life that it’s taken on outside of the book, the community that’s built around it now, that’s what I see when I see [the logo] to the point… where I look at it, it takes me a few minutes to remember that it’s something I designed. It’s really great to see people embrace it and find their own personal meaning. I think that everybody who’s been able to identify with it has done it for considerably personal reasons… (personal interview, 2/6/19)

The personal connection to the logo that de Landro mentions spans location, sexual orientation, political motivations, and more for the nine fans I interviewed for this study. Like Participant 4’s interest in noncompliance as pushback against Mormonism in her city, Participant 2 sees noncompliance as pride in queer representation and a delineation from her father who is a southern Baptist preacher (personal interview, 1/30/19). For Participant 7, a teacher in a predominantly Catholic area of South Texas, the visibility of her NC tattoo is a reminder of an in-group that transcends location and openly disregards her school district’s no tattoo policy (personal interview, 1/23/19).
Like de Landro noted, the attraction to the NC logo is particularly personal for each member of the fandom. Two interviewees stated that they are attracted to the NC logo for its queer representation, two more stated that their interest in the logo was politically motivated by events including the 2016 election that put President Donald Trump in the White House and the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court despite allegations of sexual assault against him. Still more interviewees cited family dynamics and stress, abandoning religious practices, or escaping abusive relationships as their own personal draw to the logo. I will explore these reasons in more detail in the next section. For now I note that while each reason for joining the fandom varies, and, the common factor for all nine interviewees was the sense of connection and belonging that comes with the logo. Participant 1 recalls the feelings of excitement when meeting other members of the fandom with the NC tattoo: “My favorite is meeting people who know what it is… I once had a girl scream and run across a whole restaurant to be like, ’oh my god.’ She showed me her tattoo… she’s like, ’all right, we’re sisters” (personal interview, 1/26/19).

The members of the *Bitch Planet* fandom have formed an ingroup around the theme of noncompliance and proudly display the NC logo as a symbol that helps connect the various and disparate members of this network. As I have mentioned, the NC logo appears on clothing, blankets, jewelry, artwork, and more. Given the proliferation of the logo beyond the pages of the comic, we must consider why this fandom chose noncompliance to represent them, particularly when the label and accompanying “NC” are actually used to *negatively* stigmatize and demean the women on Bitch Planet.
Reclaiming Noncompliance

As the story of *Bitch Planet* progresses, readers are acquainted with a host of diverse characters sentenced to serve time and reform on the prison planet. The patriarchal ruling class, known as fathers, have a myriad of different ways to “help” the women sentenced to Bitch Planet see the error of their ways. In issue 3, for example, readers follow a prisoner named Penelope as the guards hook her to a machine that uses electrical pulses to “take what you ‘see’ in your own mind and put it on the screen” (*Bitch Planet*, issue 3). The goal is to help Penelope and other prisoners visualize their “ideal” selves in order to compare this ideal to the real thing. Of course, the fathers believe that everyone’s idealized version of themselves matches society’s expectations to be conventionally attractive to men. One of the charges against Penelope that sent her to Bitch Planet was “wanton obesity,” which the fathers see as unattractive and offensive (*Bitch Planet*, issue 3). When the machine turns on and Penelope’s ideal self is visualized, however, she looks exactly the same as she does in real life. As the men in the room scramble to find something wrong with their machine, claiming that there has to be a mistake, Penelope tells the reader, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. I ain’t broke” (*Bitch Planet*, issue 3).
Like all of the prisoners on Bitch Planet, Penelope is mocked and underestimated by the guards and fathers. To further humiliate the prisoners, the fathers organize a game called Megaton where the prisoners are supposed to play against the guards. In a game that serves as an overt metaphor for society, the rules on how to play keep changing, even while the game is being played, in order to favor the male guards and help them defeat the female prisoners. When the game and the ever-changing rules result in the death of one of the prisoners, Penelope and Kam, the two main protagonists, decide that they need to escape the prison planet before they all wind up dead. Before making their escape, Kam finds and rescues her sister, a fellow prisoner living in a wing of Bitch Planet reserved for trans women. When Kam and her sister finally reunite, Kam looks out across the entirety of the prison, at the other prisoners she is helping to escape the planet, and proclaims, “she’s my blood. But they’re all my sisters” (*Bitch Planet*, issue 9).
The bonds forged between women like Penelope and Kam while on the prison planet showcase a sisterhood that transcends blood, race, religion, sexuality, and even gender. In my interview with Participant 1, a fan and costume designer, she notes that the bonds formed on the planet are “a celebration of sisterhood in all forms… even in the darkest and most terrible places…” (personal interview, 1/26/19). The women on Bitch Planet, like Penelope and Kam, and the women that comprise the real-life fandom surrounding *Bitch Planet* all celebrate their collective sense of what it means to be noncompliant, something that is frowned upon so fervently in the comic that prisoners are negatively branded with the “NC” as a reminder of their bad behavior. Like Penelope looking in the mirror and subverting the notion of the “ideal” body, however, noncompliance is hailed by the Bitch Planet prisoners and fans as a *positive* label.

Claiming and subverting the negative label of “noncompliant” as a positive one is inherently important to the characters in the story and to the readers. In “The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels: The Reciprocal Relationship Between Power and Self-Labeling,” Galinsky et. al. (2013) state that “self-labeling with a derogatory group label may ironically weaken its stigmatizing force and even revalue it, transforming the very words designed to demean into expressions of self-respect” (p. 2020). The ability to self-label and associate with a term once considered derogatory actually gives the individual or group identifying with the term agency: “any action taker is seen as possessing power” (Galinsky et. al. 2013, p. 2021). When it comes to “noncompliance” as a derogatory term used to denote deviance, particularly in women, reclaiming the term and taking pride in its use “challenges the negative implications” (Galinsky et. al. 2013, p. 2021). Indeed, Galinsky et. al. (2013) further argue that when a group reclaims a derogatory term, the group may experience greater power through subverting the negative connotations of the word (p. 2021).
Like Penelope subverting the fathers’ hope to reform her into a submissive, sexually available, and compliant woman, Penelope proves that there is power in being “noncompliant” and butting up against societal expectations. In fact, the women of Bitch Planet begin to regain their power over the fathers and the prison guards when they take collective pride in their noncompliance. Whether someone is on Bitch Planet for being homosexual, trans, fat, opinionated, or otherwise threatening to the patriarchy, each prisoner is given the “NC” label, which later becomes a rallying cry for the characters. Despite their differences, they are all noncompliant together, and, as a group, they have power.

Similarly to the use of “noncompliant” as a derogatory term targeted towards women, during the final debate in the 2016 candidacy for U.S. president, Donald Trump referred to his opponent, Hillary Rodham Clinton, as “such a nasty woman” (qtd. in Riemer 2019, p. 258). Trump’s use of the word “nasty” to describe his female opponent was a deliberate attempt to undercut Clinton’s success as a politician and candidate, and revert back to a gendered system that “rewards women for feminine ideals of modesty, niceness, warmth, and sensitivity to others, and often penalizes women for engaging in the kind of competitive, self-promoting behaviors that are accepted as appropriate for men” (Riemer 2019, p. 251). Labels like “bad girl, dirty girl, bitchy female, and nasty woman, become the antipode of nice” and are used to assert control through belittling and disregarding women’s voices (Riemer 2019, pp. 260-61). After Trump’s public declaration that Clinton’s assertiveness made her a “nasty woman,” however, the phrase appeared as a social media hashtag, printed across t-shirts, and even paraded on protest signs by women hoping to label themselves as “nasty women.” When traits that are typically lauded in men as positive attributes conversely make women “nasty,” the label “nasty woman” was quickly claimed as a “badge of honor.” Women used the term to take pride in their ability to
“upend feminine norms” (Riemer 2019, p. 63) and subvert societal expectations and standards for approved, feminine behaviors.

Multiple interviewees for this project similarly claim that noncompliance is a “badge of honor” and an aspirational symbol of resistance against this feminist norm that they actively hope to subvert. When asked about using noncompliance as a positive affirmation of the group’s identity, Participant 8 stated that “it seems weird to take this, what in the universe of the story is a negative, externally-imposed branding really, to adopt that… I think in some ways it’s more, like, aspirational… This idea that if I were in this universe I would want to be… I wouldn’t want to go to a terrible prison and be tortured, but I would hope that I would be the kind of person who did” (personal interview, 1/31/19). Participant 4 further claims that the power of the noncompliance label actually comes from being subversive: “Be afraid of me, I’m subversive. You’ve made everything about me inherently subversive. Now we’re at the point where it’s like, ’okay, the only power is in being subversive’” (personal interview, 1/23/19).

In chapter 3 I introduced the broad arrow that served as de Landro’s inspiration for designing a logo on the prison uniforms seen in *Bitch Planet*. The broad arrow was used as a symbol to mark prisoners as government property. But, in the early 1900s, the Women’s Social and Political Union in the United Kingdom prominently displayed the broad arrow as a sign of their pride in social unrest and resistance (*Broad Arrow* 2013, n.p.). Women marched with the broad arrow prominently displayed, like a badge of honor, to dispel the notion that imprisonment would curb their movement and push for equality (Figure 31). By taking pride in the fact that they were arrested and forced to wear the broad arrow, then, the Women’s Social and Political Union worked to strip the broad arrow of its original intent to mark and dehumanize.
Despite such work to reclaim derogatory labels, such as the fandom and the prisoners in the fictitious Bitch Planet claiming the term “noncompliant” as a positive, aspirational label, some theorists would argue that reclaiming stigmatized terminology can have a negative impact on the group. With a book like *Bitch Planet* where the term “bitch” is displayed prominently on the cover, it is necessary to consider the impact of derogatory terms like “bitch,” “nasty,” and “noncompliant” that are traditionally used to underscore a group’s power through degradation. Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost (2009), for example, argue that “women who feel good about throwing around ’bitches’ may have a hard time believing that sexism exists. If a woman doesn’t feel bothered by ’bitch,’ and likes it, how can she believe she is oppressed as a woman more generally?” (p. 60). In “Reclaiming Critical Analysis: The Social Harms of ’Bitch,’” Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost (2009) make the argument that the term “bitch” actually reinforces gendered
stereotypes and any attempt to change the term’s stigma “sends the message that it is acceptable for men to use the term” (p. 61).

Conversely, the editors of the U.S. magazine *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* claim that their use of the term “bitch” in the title is indicative of the word being used to describe “women who speak their minds, who have opinions and don’t shy away from expressing them, and who don’t sit by and smile uncomfortably if they’re bothered or offended” (*About Us*, n.d.). The editors of *Bitch Magazine* proudly state, “if being an outspoken feminist means being a bitch, we’ll take that as a compliment, thank” (*About Us*, n.d.). The use of the term “bitch” for the magazine and for the women populating Bitch Planet demonstrates what Annie Hill (2016) says is “resignifying the term and proliferating parodic performances of its stigmatized referent” (p. 31). Hill’s research on the Toronto SlutWalk analyzes a community attempting to rework and subvert the meaning of the term “slut.” In 2011, police constable Michael Sanguinetti told women that if they don’t want to be raped, “women should avoid dressing like sluts” (qtd. in Hill 2016, p. 23). Hill notes that claiming someone acts or dresses like a “slut” forces that person to need to refute and deny the claim, reaffirming that there is a negative connotation associated with the term. Formed as a protest against negative terminology, SlutWalk Toronto formed as an annual protest that seeks to “resignify this weapon work” (Hill 2016, p. 32): “SlutWalk shows how term and referent can be reworked when the target speaks in that name rather than dodging or denying it… It subverts interpelling women as bad or good, rapeable or respectable… to reclaim ’slut’ is to resist the practice of overseeing women based on a sexual division of labels” (Hill 2016, p. 32). SlutWalk’s mission is to confront the terminology and its damage, negating its value by adopting and reclaiming the term through the performative protest.
Participant 3 states that she is interested in reclaiming terms, especially when terms or practices were previously used to condemn and punish women:

I really like the power of that reclamation, so I also am a big… I’m really into, like, the witchy stuff and the pagan community and stuff like that too, and that, I kind of have a similar experience with where it’s always been like, that was a thing women were called as punishment. That was like the people who didn’t do what they were supposed to do, and that’s what the noncompliant tattoo is, within the fiction, is these are the women who refuse to be governed the way they were supposed to... They refused to behave the way that they were supposed to be, and I think there’s something really powerful about openly saying, “I refuse.” Like, I am that person, I refuse to be the person you want me to be. (personal interview, 2/2/19)

More interviewees noted a feeling of power that comes from claiming noncompliance as a subversive and unapologetic means of pushing back on what society expects from women and girls. Participant 9 even notes, “I had left an abusive relationship, and it was very emotionally abusive and controlling, my ex at one point told me that I shouldn’t be interested in keeping an opinion about feminists. And I took it personally. I was like, ’wow, maybe I’m not a feminist’” (personal interview, 1/22/19). The driving force behind “noncompliance” in Bitch Planet helped Participant 4 reclaim the notion of feminism and reassert control over her own life. For Participant 4, this notion of noncompliance takes the phrase “well behaved women rarely make history” to a new level: “Not only am I not well-behaved, but I don’t care about it. I don’t care about being well-behaved. I’m actively noncompliant” (personal interview, 1/23/19).

All of the people interviewed for this project took immense pride in the term noncompliance, enough to even tattoo the accompanying “NC” logo on their skin permanently.
Thus, this begs the question why these nine interviewees, and the hundreds of other members of the Bitch Planet fandom, felt the need to permanently mark their bodies as a display of belonging?

**The NC Logo as a Tattoo**

A massive amount of scholarship exists about comic fandoms and identity politics: Hillary L. Chute (2010), Jacqueline Danziger-Russell (2013), Deborah Whaley (2016), and Carolyn Cocca (2016), for example, all critique the many ways that the comic book industry and fandoms oftentimes exclude, and perpetuate stereotypes about, anyone other than the white, heteronormative male. The NC logo both within and beyond *Bitch Planet*, exists as a response to exclusion *within* that very fandom. In order to understand the work of the NC logo within its respective fandom, we must first understand how the act of tattooing is itself an act of subversion. Like the reclamation of the “noncompliant” label discussed above, tattoos themselves are traditionally seen as subversive or taboo, particularly for women. Beverly Yuen Thompson (2015) notes that tattoos were historically considered part of masculine social practices and are “often associated with hyper-masculine subcultures such as the military or criminal cultures” (p. 4). Conversely, tattoos for women are seen as a threat to feminine identity and the female tattoo “collector” (someone wearing more than one tattoo) often “receive[s] social sanctions that reinforce the deviant-ness of tattooing, as well as the gender transgression of the design” (Thompson 2015, p. 5). Thompson (2015) posits that the attribution of tattoos as particularly deviant for women stems from cultural practices that places social value on the pursuit for beauty standards that are often unobtainable (p. 39). Thus, women’s bodies are continuously producing and performing gendered identity via behaviors and self-expression:
“Alternative body projects that do not pursue beauty are considered deviant: female bodybuilding, gender reassignment, butch lesbians, and heavily tattooed women” (Thompson 2015, p. 36). While this dissertation’s primary concern is not gender performance, it is necessary to note that Thompson (2015) is referencing the work of Judith Butler\(^3\) who argues that there is a difference between biological sex and how we present or perform that gender to the public. The social world impacts physical bodies, thus, our understanding of gender is actually predicated on this socially sanctioned performance of gender and not biological indicators (i.e. girls should behave like girls by wearing makeup or taking ballet).

As we saw with Penelope, one of the protagonists sent to Bitch Planet for being obese and unattractive to men, not conforming to gendered, physical performances that prioritize conventional beauty standards (or, how a woman should look) is a crime within the world of the comic book by DeConnick and de Landro. While real-life nonconformity to these gendered performances might not see women taken off-planet, the nine women interviewed for this project all see the act of tattooing as a transgressive component of their self-identification. According to Participant 4, getting the NC tattoo “was an act of aggression on my body. It was this self-possessed label that I could go and make, and declare myself as somebody who was not going to conform to whatever expectation, whatever complacency was going to settle in as a result of exhaustion in the current political climate” (personal interview, 1/23/19). By “political” climate, Participant 4 is referring explicitly to the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president in 2016. Parker was not the only person I interviewed who expressly noted that the act of getting the NC tattoo was a form of political protest. When politicians, such as President Trump, work to enact

policies that further police women’s bodies, choosing to mark and alter the body in question transforms the body, and the deviant act of tattooing, into a protest. Participant 3 notes that her visible NC tattoo makes her feel “powerful” by giving her control over her body: “there’s lots of permanent shit that happens to us that we don’t get to choose that really fucks us up, so I might as well get to choose some cool stuff, too” (personal interview, 2/2/19).

Five out of the nine interviewees noted that the act of tattooing the logo on their skin, something far more permanent than wearing the design on a t-shirt for example, was a conscientious decision to defy social norms that heavily mediate the female body. According to Participant 4, when asked about why she chose to get the NC logo as a tattoo, she stated:

I think it’s… kind of a discussion of dominion over your body and what belongs to you. And so much about our bodies belongs to other people and belongs to society and belongs to expectations… Every time I get a tattoo I am more grounded in my body because I have marked it. I think that also gives us the permission to mark up our bodies and not have to deal with other people having a commentary on it. I do what I have to do to live in my body safely, which is decorate it with tattoos it turns out. That’s just what I do. (personal interview, 1/23/19)

Participant 4 continues that there is agency in choosing to mark one’s body, particularly in a way that is seen as transgressive or defiant towards social standards:

I’m somebody that hit puberty very early, my body has always been very hotly discussed. I’m very tall. I’m almost six feet tall. I’ve been that way since I was 12. About age nine men started yelling shit at me from cars. I was heavily groomed as a young girl and I felt kind of screwed out of girlhood because men wanted to fuck me. Then I hit college and I became a little bit frumpier and then men stopped talking to me altogether, and I was like,
"Oh, I peaked at age 11." There’s so much baggage that we put up with about our bodies, where as every time I get that tattoo, I am accepting a part of my body and I’m accepting what it looks like, and I am making an alteration that’s mine. It’s how I’m choosing to adorn it. (personal interview, 1/23/19)

The act of getting the tattoo, as a form of protest and active deviance, then, is powerful and agentive for the tattoo wearer. The act of choosing to mark one’s body gives power where society typically works to revoke that power and mediate bodies in a way that is highly performative. And, as Participant 4 notes above, this performance is usually done for the pleasure of the opposite sex, which is something Parker and others are working to subvert.

Marking the body becomes a personal act to reclaim and own one’s body from a system that often puts bodies on display as sexual objects.

Indeed, Thompson (2015) claims that these gendered performances that enact how we present our bodies, and how others then perceive our bodies, help to constitute identity. The performance of gendering a body, notes Thompson (2015), is typically based on an overexposure to “beauty culture” found in an abundance of media, such as television, movies, and magazines (p. 42). It is interesting, then, to consider how this conversation about mediating and policing bodies intersects with how I opened this chapter - *Bitch Planet* is situated in a highly visual medium (comics) that often presents women’s bodies as conventionally, sexually appealing to male readers. While *Bitch Planet* introduces the comic book medium to far more diverse body types and representations of female characters, tattoos similarly offer a means of rebuking this mediation and reclaiming the body in varying forms and presentations. *Bitch Planet*’s representation of diverse bodies, accompanied by the trend of tattooing the NC logo by fans, both work to normalize bodies that are already in some ways “marked” and considered deviant:
“Women of color, lesbians, disabled people, and other already-marked bodies will be interpreted more harshly, as multiply ’deviant’” with the addition of tattoos, says Thompson (2015, p. 42).

This notion of deviance, however, is exactly the message that the tattooed fans of *Bitch Planet* are looking to convey. While identifying as “noncompliant” is already a form of *chosen* deviance, the act of tattooing sends a visible, clear message to anyone outside of the ingroup. Doss and Hubbard (2009) claim that this communicative practice is heightened based on how visible the tattoos are to the public audience:

People who choose to obtain tattoos in visible locations on their body know that others might see their tattoos and form judgments about them. Roughly speaking, then, the extent to which individuals endorse the view that tattoos are a form of communication (i.e., have communicative value) is likely to be positively related to the visibility of tattoos. (p. 64)

Out of the nine participants interviewed for this study, eight describe their tattoos as highly visible, and one described her tattoo placement as “semi-visible.” In all nine cases, the visibility of the NC tattoo was a conscious decision. Participant 3 notes that she was considering having the tattoo placed on her wrist, but she often wears jewelry or a watch, “and I wanted to be able to see it, so I moved it up” (personal interview, 2/2/19). Participant 2 claims that the tattoo, its meaning, and its visibility all relate to the theme of deviance and noncompliance: “Getting it on my forearm in particular was a really conscious choice that I made because, you know, I live in the south, it’s hot here. I’m going to be wearing short sleeves and people are going to see this” (personal interview, 1/30/19).

Similarly, Participant 7, a teacher in Southern Texas, enjoys the taboo of her visible NC tattoo in her community, and particularly as a response to her school board banning visible
tattoos in the classroom. “When it gets really hot,” says Participant 7, “I put my hair up and [the tattoo] shows, and then I remember that it stands for noncompliant and I just start laughing because that’s what I’m doing when I’m showing… my tattoo” (personal interview, 1/2319). The very act of having a tattoo is seen by fans as an act of noncompliance, which adds to the appeal of the tattoo and enhances the wearer’s commitment to the message.

Moving from comic to skin, and representing a myriad of different personal connections and commitments to the notion of noncompliance, the NC logo is largely detached from the original source material. While most interviewees noted that the comic introduced them to the logo and its meaning, each wearer’s investment in the NC - from a political protest to a celebration of queer identity - is individual and personal. Creator Valentine de Landro states, “I almost feel detached from it when I see it as a tattoo. I see it as that person’s art because they’ve already made it so personal for themselves” (personal interview, 2/6/19). Further, writer Kelly Sue DeConnick claims, “The people who get the tattoos, I don’t think it’s about the book at all. If we stopped at three issues, that tattoo would still mean the same thing to them” (Sharp 2015, n.p.). To further enhance each wearer’s personal attachment to the tattoo and message, most fans have actually recreated and re-designed the NC logo in individual ways. In the next section I analyze how these changes to the original NC design help to solidify the logo’s move from the pages of the comic to an agentitive actant in its own right.

**Designing the NC Tattoo**

While the original NC logo appeared on prison dungarees in large, white, solid block letters, the design has since appeared in a multitude of different forms, transforming from the original source material to offer a more personal, individualized take on the design. Participant
7’s design, for example, changes the color of the “NC” to purple and depicts a blue octopus wrapped around the letters (Figure 32):

![Participant 7's NC tattoo with the addition of an octopus as part of the design.](image)

For Participant 7, the octopus design and the color purple represent personalized elements of the design that make her tattoo unique. While she may have the same NC as other fans, her variation on the design is individualized. Similarly, Participant 3 notes that she didn’t want “just the NC symbol” (personal interview, 2/2/19). Participant 3 had the tattoo artist modified the original design to add flowers around the edges of the “NC” and texture within the block letters that almost mimics the look of stained glass (Figure 33):
Some fans interviewed for this project even redesigned the NC logo to include iconography related to other communities they identify with, creating an intersection between self-labeling as “noncompliant” and the individual ways that each wearer sees themselves as enacting (or performing) noncompliance. For example, Participant 4 chose to make her NC tattoo purple with the image of a planet protruding through the letters (Figure 34):
According to Participant 4, “I picked purple specifically. I’m like, ’I want it to be kind of queer. I want it to be kind of astral and out of this world,’ because I want noncompliance to be part of breaking out of molds” (personal interview, 1/23/19). For Participant 4, then, the notion of noncompliance is related specifically to identifying as queer. However, embedding the planet and the purple as part of the NC tattoo allows Participant 4 to take pride in queerness and noncompliance, since the two are intrinsically connected.

For Participant 6, the concept of noncompliance is tied to the concept of resilience: “no matter how bad crap has gotten, we’re going to get through it,” Stump stated (personal interview, 1/27/19). Participant 6 translated this notion of perseverance into a tattoo design that includes a phoenix bursting from the “NC” lettering (Figure 35):

![Figure 34: Participant 6’s NC tattoo depicting a phoenix rising from the ashes.](image)
When asked how the image of the phoenix spoke to her, Participant 6 noted that the concept of rising from the ashes felt tied to the overall theme of what it means to be noncompliant: “I think, for me, like the whole concept of the phoenix rising again and never being completely finished, completely gone. Like, no matter how shitty my day is or things are going… I’m going to come out of the fire and I’m going to be okay” (personal interview, 1/27/19).

For many of the interviewees, choosing the NC as a tattoo, and then choosing how to adorn and personalize the NC, was a very nuanced decision. For example, I asked Participant 4, who chose a purple NC and a planet to represent her identification as a member of the queer community (Figure 34), why she chose to embed those elements as part of the “NC” design instead of choosing a different symbol altogether, such as the symbol for “woman” or a rainbow that is often used in queer imagery. In response, Participant 4 stated:

So, for me, and I can only speak for me, I can’t speak for my community, but for me actually the symbol for woman makes me concerned with being lumped in with TERFs. So where I am, there was a pretty significant trans and non-binary community, and I am very cognizant of dog whistles that people use as a means to exclude, and we’ve had pretty overt actions of exclusion and a lot of violence… I identify as a woman. I am a cis person. I live on the binary and I am comfortable with the gender that I was assigned, but I think that is a luxury and definitely a privilege. I think I wore it through kind of second-wave feminism in high school, so I don’t need to go through and hang on to a lot of that stuff anymore. I see it as very important for people on their journey to accepting that we live in a patriarchal world and we’ve got to overcome that. (personal interview, 1/23/19).
Thus, Participant 4 sees the NC logo and its accompanying message one of inclusivity, where other logos or icons might exclude, particularly trans women. Participant 2, who also identifies as a member of the queer community, claims that she avoided the use of a triangle, an image popularly associated with the LGBTQ community, because of its appropriation from “Holocaust imagery” (personal interview, 1/30/19). Indeed, in chapter 3 I looked at the use of triangles and broad arrows as a means of labeling and dehumanizing prisoners.

Participant 6, who redesigned her NC tattoo to include a phoenix (Figure 35), claims a similar draw to the NC logo for its inclusive nature:

I think it’s more inclusive than some of the others. The female symbol, I feel like it kind of can get bandied about to exclude trans women. The raised fist, I’m about as white bread as it comes and to me, it’s always going to feel very black power. I don’t have any right to be putting that on me. I don’t have any claim to the history and the emotion behind it. But NC, I think it’s kind of what we make it and I think it can be a lot more inclusive than those. It hasn’t been around as long, so it’s not got as much negative background or quite as tight a focus, I think, especially after volume two or after the second book two came out and all of the issues within it, because they started exploring the side of the planet that is trans women. And that it’s not all biological. It’s not biologically essentialist. (personal interview, 1/27/19)

The NC design is inclusive as well as malleable, able to match the identity and personality of the wearer in a way that perhaps other icons and logos are unable to. Participant 8 claims that the malleability of the logo design, and the original source material, make the logo a good choice for wearers who want to demonstrate allyship to marginalized groups, such as the trans community:
When groups that are typically marginalized generate symbols, either deliberately or symbols emerge from their activism… then I don’t need to be included in that, because I’m included in everything else. I’m included in romcoms and popular media and the college classroom, and all these other spaces that we exist in, so if I’m going to put a symbol of intersectional feminism on my body, I’d better be very careful to make sure it’s one that the creator deliberately chose to include me in, as opposed to one that was created for the purposes of including otherwise marginalized folks. (personal interview, 1/31/19)

The use of the NC logo within the original source material, *Bitch Planet*, “applies to a spectrum of bodies and identities and norms” (Participant 8, personal interview, 1/31/19). The logo is able to communicate the ideals of the wearer by promoting inclusivity.

**Mutual Transformation**

The tattooed bodies of fans are transformed during the process of tattooing, both from the act of receiving a tattoo and from the tattoo acting as admittance into the *Bitch Planet* fandom. In “Painted Bodies: Representing the Self and Reclaiming the Body through Tattoos,” Strubel and Jones (2017) note that this transformation for the tattoo wearer’s body is often highly positive: “People with tattoos consistently viewed their body art as an act of self-expression and a unique form of self-identification where the conferred uniqueness generates a new-found confidence and sense of self control that was not experienced prior to tattooing” (p. 1231). As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the fans interviewed for my study expressed a more positive relationship with the tattoo and their bodies once it was permanently on their skin. But, along with transforming the fans who sport the NC as a tattoo, that NC logo is also transformed as it
circulates and enters into new and unanticipated encounters with groups, individuals, and even other things.

Laurie Gries (2015) calls this process *mutual transformation*. “When accounting for the enduring vitality of visual things,” says Gries (2015), “we ought to pay attention not only to how things undergo constant change as they circulate with time and space but also to how they cogenerate change via their material encounters” (p. 71). For the NC logo, this means that we should consider how the logo circulated as a symbol for an emerging fandom, and then also became a phenomena as a tattoo, transforming the bodies of the tattoo wearers. But, we must also consider the ways that the NC logo has been altered during its circulation as well. As I demonstrated in the above section, the design of the original “NC” has been literally altered as new fans reimagine and repurpose the design. For some, the newly designed “NC” becomes a symbol of queerness, and for others it is one of political resistance or allyship. As both DeConnick and de Landro noted, these changes - the circulation and subsequent transformation of the logo - were unanticipated and largely divorced from the initial appearance of the logo in the pages of the *Bitch Planet* comic book.

Most interestingly, however, is the logo’s ability to generate action and consequences devoid of the original source material. For Participant 6, having the NC tattoo prompted her participation in political movements, such as the Women’s March: “I think that my interest in a lot of movements probably came about in part because of the tattoo” (personal interview, 1/27/19). Participant 6 continues that getting the tattoo and becoming a member of the fandom was in large part a reaction to pushing against the status quo or repressive politics. Participant 6 states, “I wanted my reaction to be permanent” (personal interview, 1/27/19). For Participant 3, the aspirational element of the logo, and its constant presence on her body, serves as a reminder
to stay active and strive to be continuously noncompliant. “I wanted something to encourage me to stay active,” says Participant 3, “[the tattoo] makes it a permanent part of me and so hopefully then, in turn, it makes it a permanent part of my action and how I’m living” (personal interview, 2/2/19).

Other interviewees noted that the message of noncompliance, and its permanence as a tattoo, spurred difficult conversations with family members, inducting friends into the *Bitch Planet* fandom, attending fan-related events, joining protests and social movements, and even gaining the courage to leave an abusive relationship. These are all consequences of the NC logo that are divergent, unique, and entirely unanticipated to the creators of the series. From its initial appearance on the overalls of the prisoners, the logo has undergone major transformation and cultivated actions beyond its original purposes. The logo has drastically changed from the pages of the comic book but, in turn, it has also changed the members of the fandom and those sporting the tattoo as a permanent reminder to always aspire to noncompliance in whatever individual form that may take.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In this chapter, I followed the logo as it left the pages of *Bitch Planet* and helped to form a newly emerging fandom of like-minded fans looking for acceptance. As the logo helped to form this fandom, the logo became a symbol and a tattoo that became even further removed from the original source material. The tattoo changed meanings and even created actions as it changed (literally and metaphorically) by coming into new associations. According to Gries (2015), “we can think of an image as a vital force that, once unleashed, acquires thing-power through its various material encounters. As a virtual entity, an image circulates as it transcends media,
materializes in different material versions (which themselves splinter and experience lives of their own), and thus intra-acts with humans and nonhumans” (p. 73). The NC logo exerts agency through its interactions as it circulates, transforming and generating consequences through these interactions.

In the next and final chapter, I will consider how all of the divergent elements of this project, from process to material consequences, are related. I also discuss the ways this research is limited and identify avenues for future research and analysis.
“Comics deal with two fundamental communicating devices: words and images. Admittedly this is an arbitrary separation. But, since in the modern world of communication they are treated as independent disciplines, it seems valid. Actually, they are derivatives of a single origin and in the skillful employment of words and images lies the expressive potential of the medium.”

-- Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*

My goal in this project was to examine the agency of the NC logo as it circulates from the pages of a comic book and transforms into a powerful rhetorical actant, specifically in the form of a tattoo. This project was born from my own interest in comic book fandoms, the comic book *Bitch Planet*, and the NC tattoo itself. Through qualitative interviews with fans and the creator of the NC logo, this project 1) located my research in an ongoing conversation about visual rhetoric, comic studies, and new materialism; 2) analyzed the composition and production of the NC logo through an interview with Valentine de Landro, the creator of the logo; and 3) tracked the NC logo as it entered into new associations with fans wearing that logo as a tattoo, and changed “in terms of design, form, medium, materiality, genre, and function” (Gries, 2015, p. 117). In this final Chapter, I want to synthesize my analysis of the lifecycle of the NC logo and then consider the implications of my research for future studies in visual rhetoric. I begin with a summary of my research and offer a few final notes about the NC logo and then discuss the
implications of this research for rhetoricians interested in researching and teaching visual rhetoric.

**On Studying Composition and Production**

I first discovered the NC logo in the pages of the comic *Bitch Planet* in 2015, and subsequently tattooed the logo on my body in 2016. But, my interest in this topic grew from my work in the comic industry as a writer. Watching the production and composition of comics from an insider position gave me an appreciation for the work of the NC logo that I didn’t have previously. And, as a researcher, this position is a unique contribution to the work currently being done in visual rhetoric. In Chapter 3, I discussed my interview with Valentine de Landro and the work of producing the NC logo. Born from a symbol on prison uniforms that marked prisoner’s bodies as property, the NC logo serves as an icon to *Bitch Planet* readers to signify and symbolize that women’s bodies in the book belong to the state. Through the tools used to create the logo, the history that helped design it, the colors used to transform it, the placement of the logo on the prisoner’s bodies, and the style of the letters used in the logo, the stark, white “NC” logo that appears in the pages of the comic proves just how rich and “entangled” a single visual element can be (Gries 2015, p. 293).

Laurie Gries (2015) claims that we need to move beyond studying a single element of an image and consider “a complex rhetorical ecology of historical, contemporary, virtual, physical, and internal and external factors” that all impact a visual’s circulation and reception (p. 293). However, I argue that this discussion is even more “entangled” when the production involved in creating the image is considered. The NC logo is a unique, rhetorical actant, but our perception of the logo’s agency is further enhanced when we consider that the tattoo originated from a
comic book. As I argue in Chapter 3, scripts, line art, coloring, lettering, and printing are all fragmented components of the comic book that work together to create meaning. Barbara Postema (2013) claims that these fragments are what make comics such a unique and immersive site of study: “The gaps in comics continuously ask to be filled, which is one of the main reasons why comics are so engaging, so immersive: they foreground the process of narration and invite the reader to participate” (p. 125). Similarly, Theirry Groensteen (2007) calls these fragmented components a “system” that “constitutes an organic totality that associates a complex combination of elements, parameters, and multiple procedures” (p. 159). These webs and fragmented components that appear in the production stages must be analyzed in order to fully understand the lifecycle of the NC logo.

The NC Logo as a Tattoo

In Chapter 4, I moved the logo from production and composition through the remaining five stages of Gries’ (2015) iconographic tracking: transformation, circulation, distribution, collectivity, and consequentiality. Importantly, Chapter 4 offered interviews from nine fans who self-identify as members of the *Bitch Planet* fandom and wear the NC logo as a tattoo on their bodies. The goal of this chapter was to understand 1) how the logo moves from the comics to the fandom; and 2) how that movement reflects the meaning-making and rhetorical agency of images such as the logo. As Gries (2015) states in *Still Life With Rhetoric*, “images are important members of communities that have a rhetorical life of their own, take on multiple civic roles, introduce new values into the world, and shape collective life in multifaceted ways” (p. 295). The fan interviews that I discuss in Chapter 4 offered an in-depth analysis of the ways the tattoo has changed meaning from the original intentions of the creative team behind *Bitch Planet*. This
transformation was both literal - the design of the “NC” from the original logo has been changed and rearranged in a myriad of different ways (fig. 1) - and figurative, prompting many interviewees to note that the presence of the NC logo on their body changes their relationship with their body, as well as prompts social and political action spurred by their enhanced investment in being “noncompliant.”

For creator Valentine de Landro, the use of the logo within the *Bitch Planet* fandom is a unique experience that has taken on a very unexpected life outside of the book:

> It’s really great to see people embrace it and find their own personal meaning. I think that everybody who’s been able to identify with it has done so for considerably personal reasons, which is, again, humbling… it’s one of those things where you sort of hope that you can do anything that causes people to react as an artist, and for people to react in so many different ways to it is something I don’t think I’m going to get used to any time soon. (personal interview, 1/6/19)

The individual connections that de Landro mentions are what makes the NC logo, and the larger study of comics, such an interesting research site. Whether that meaning comes from the reader actively participating in interpreting the play of visual and linguistic cues on the printed page, or generating individualized content outside of the pages of the comic, such as tattoos, comics and comic fandoms offer an exciting and unique research site.
While my discussion of fandoms has been confined to tattooed fans identifying as part of the *Bitch Planet* fandom, I only scraped the surface of fan participation research. While Chapter 3 notes that comics are unique in their ability to engage the reader with both visual and linguistic cues, I would argue that this is also what makes the fandoms such rich sites of study. Fans explicitly participate in meaning-making through engaging with text but also move beyond that text to engage with the material at conventions, through fan fiction, online communities and forums, fan-generated art, and more. Many of these types of fan engagement are unique to comics and offer another means for rhetoricians to consider incorporating comics into their research agendas.

**Implications**

**Methodological Implications**

This project set out to analyze the NC logo through a new materialist lens using Laurie Gries’ (2015) iconographic tracking as my methodology. Iconographic tracking was expressly selected for its ability to help study how an image can “assemble and reassemble collective life” and “bring a diverse array of entities into intra-action” (Gries 2015, p. 103). My research analyzes a “communicative artifact” that complicates rhetoric’s long tradition of prioritizing “linguistic artifacts, suggesting that visual symbols are insignificant or inferior” (Foss 2004, p. 303). As I noted in Chapter 2, there is an ongoing discussion about the definition and boundaries of visual rhetoric. Sonja K. Foss (2004) claims that one of the most important goals of visual rhetoric should be to “develop a rhetorical theory that is more comprehensive and inclusive” (p. 303). While this includes prioritizing visuals and symbols that Foss (2004) argues have been too often ignored in rhetorical theory, I argue that comics offer an even more unique site of study.
that disrupts the dichotomy of words and images by forcing a symbiotic and seamless relationship between the two: “the interplay of words and images” achieving a “successful cross-breeding of illustration and prose” (Eisner 2008, p. 2).

The “visual codes” that appear in comics “allow an almost limitless range of expression and combination of elements, as opposed to linguistic codes that are made up of a finite number of elements whose combination is governed by the rules of grammar” (Postema 2013, p. 3). But, as both linguistic and visual codes work together in a comic book to make meaning, the reader is asked to actively exercise “both visual and verbal interpretive skills” (Eisner 2008, p. 2). The act of studying a comic book page asks researchers not to prioritize one element or code over another but understand and analyze the unique ways that these elements work together to engage the reader. There is far more room in visual rhetoric to investigate the interplay between these elements used in the production and composition of a comic book. While Chapter 3 offers an overview of the fragmented system of comics, in depth research that considers each element of creation, such as line art, inking, coloring, and lettering would enrich theories of visual rhetoric. While my research is focused on tracking the NC logo through each stage of creation, future research might consider the implications of each component of creation in order to better understand these processes and their communicative potential.

This project answers Foss’ (2004) call to broaden the rhetorical theories used to study images as it engages new materialism to do its work. Gries (2015) claims that iconographic tracking, actor-network theory, and new materialism “create more room on the page for those visual things to make transparent their own multiple, divergent rhetorical becomings” (p. 103). This dissertation extends technical communication’s recent engagement with comics, exploring
one particular assemblage of humans and non-humans that work together to communicate meaning both on and off the page.

**Pedagogical Implications**

In order to properly train communicators to use comics as a tool, we must also consider how to integrate comics into a classroom setting. Robert Watkins (2008) calls on rhetoricians and compositionists to consider the implications of visual narrative as text in a classroom setting. Watkins (2008) states that incorporating comics, and comics theorists, into the classroom can “provide an accessible entry for those foreign to the concepts of visual rhetoric and multimodality” (n.p). Other instructors and researchers look at ways comics can influence the composition classroom, such as Jeraldine Kraver (2013), for example, who asks students to complete an activity called “1,000 words” where students translate artwork from comic panels into prose (p. 41). The purpose of the exercise, says Kraver (2013), is to underscore that visualization “is a significant component of the learning-to-read process” (p. 42). Similarly, Alex Romagnoli (2013) explicitly brings Scott McCloud’s theories into the classroom and asks students to “write in detail about how your panel, or panels, exemplify at least one technique or idea from McCloud’s Understanding Comics and how exactly that technique plays an important role in creating meaning within the text” (p. 164). Through this assignment, Romagnoli uses comics to ask students to think critically about rhetorical choices via a unique format that might help with students’ understanding of multimodality and how texts make meaning.

Stephanie Vie and Brandy Dieterle (2016) argue that comics are an important tool for writing classrooms where critical, visual literacy is often not adequately discussed: “comics are an expressive means of addressing critical literacy in the classroom, easily showing, for example,
the invisible and naturalized elements of the technologies (including writing) that surround us” (n.p.). Vie and Dieterle (2016) offer an extensive plan for bringing comics into the composition classroom in order to ask students to think critically both about the “experience of reading the comic,” as well as how the comic’s composition helps to present socio-political ideologies in unique and compelling ways: “The interactive experience of reading a comic—which relies on the reader’s ability to navigate gutters, frames, panels, text, images, pages, and much more—provides a challenging space for students to think through how ideologies are embedded within such texts” (Vie and Dieterle 2016, n.p.).

Vie and Dieterle (2016) specifically bring comics into the classroom that might present their students with opposing views on relevant issues, such as gender identity and feminist theory. In this way, asking students to analyze and think critically about these concepts through the lens of a comic “can help reveal students’ assumptions and the stereotypes they bring to their readings of the text” (Vie and Dieterle 2016, n.p.). For example, Vie and Dieterle asked students to compare *Y the Last Man*, a comic by Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra about all men disappearing from Earth, to Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, a graphic memoir about family and LGBTQ identity. Interestingly, Vie and Dieterle (2016) found that their students brought personal experiences and assumptions to their readings and interpretations of the text: “for example, these students discovered that their initial readings relied on stereotypes of feminist women as they read into the meaning of the text—based on appearance (short hair, tough), behavior (reckless, vicious), or even alignment with other categories (all feminists are lesbians, all feminists hate men, etc.)” (Vie and Dieterle 2016, n.p.). The students’ revelations about stereotypes are prompted in part by the audience participation required to read a comic book. Vie and Dieterle (2016) state, “these comics offer opportunities to not only think about events but
how we frame them, bringing to the forefront political, ethical, and aesthetic elements of narrative” (n.p.). The “interactive experience” of working with comics allows students to think about and analyze content in a way not afforded by other mediums (Vie and Dieterle 2016, n.p.).

Similar to composition instructors turning to comics in the college classroom, Robert Watkins and Tom Lindsley (2020) contend that comics have pedagogical implications in technical communication in the form of usability and user experience (UX) (p. 304). Watkins and Lindsley (2020) note that a major issue when teaching UX is the associated costs. But, “comics and user story maps are approachable and affordable for UX practice” (Watkins and Lindsley 2020, p. 304). While we have seen arguments that comics are too familiar or lack the technicality of serious study, instructors in technical communication and composition studies argue that this is a benefit to bringing comics into the classroom and asking our students to interact with them as creators and researchers. Watkins and Lindsley (2020) claims “that comics production pedagogy helps learners understand complicated processes through a transferable sequential rhetoric and has the potential to move them from an accessible lay form (comics) toward a less familiar practitioner realm (software and UX design)” (p. 304-5).

This dissertation suggests yet another comics-based pedagogical opportunity for the writing classroom: tracking images through a system of linguistic and visual symbols is a unique analytical process that we can most readily perceive in comic books. The purpose of this assignment is to ask students to consider composition and production as well as how these images circulate into networks of other human and nonhuman actors. While other images, such as Gries’ (2015) Obama *Hope* poster, demonstrate how to successfully study and identify an image’s lifecycle, comics offer one of the most accessible formats for considering production and composition. This classroom assignment is broken into two stages:
1. **Creation**: Students are asked to use design principles to create a visual logo that they think has the potential for remediation. This assignment is not graded on artistic ability, but the students’ reflection of process. The goal is to ask students to consider why other images, such as the Obama *Hope* poster and the NC logo, received attention beyond their initial creation. For this stage of the process, I ask students to consider what their personal superhero insignia or logo might look like. Giving students a more specific prompt of what to create helps provide parameters and connects their task to the second part of the assignment.

2. **Analysis**: After students study creation by putting themselves in the position of a creator, I ask them to analyze transformation, circulation, distribution, collectivity, and consequentiality (Gries 2015) by selecting any image they would like and creating a map of its lifecycle. I give students examples to choose from, such as the Superman logo or the Jurassic Park logo, and ask students to trace all iterations of the image that they can find. In the case of the Superman logo, students will discover the many iterations of the logo appearing in comics, TV, and movies, as well as explore how fans have used the logo on clothing, or remixed and abstracted the logo for personal use.

This classroom assignment asks students to both create and analyze each step of Gries’ co-implicating processes. The following five deliverables are intended to prompt students to engage with all seven components of Gries’ process:

1. A design of the students’ personal superhero logo.

2. A written analysis of the students’ process that explains to the reader the decisions the student made while designing, as well as what tools were used. This written analysis
should be specific and consider all details of creation, such as why the student chose a particular color to use in the design.

3. A one-paragraph topic selection that explains the students’ choice of already-existent logo for the second-half of the project. This paragraph also clarifies what the students expect they will find via researching their chosen image.

4. A map of the image’s lifecycle. Students may reimagine this map however they choose, but I typically think of the map as having the chosen image in the center of the page, and lines that connect the original image to multiple different and remixed iterations of the image and where they can be found. While it is understandable that the map cannot be exhaustive, this will hopefully allow students to understand that even an individual image can have a deeper life cycle than they may have expected after writing their topic selection paragraph.

5. A written analysis of their concluding thoughts. This final paper will analyze their findings after creating an image and tracing the lifecycle of an image of their choosing.

This assignment is intended to ask students to engage with images from multiple points of view. While they are not graded on artistic ability, they should use this assignment to offer a more nuanced analysis of all seven co-implicating processes, while also using design principles to create and analyze visuals.

**Personal Reflections**

As I write this final chapter, I can’t help but notice that it’s the birthday of legendary comics creator Jack Kirby (August 28). Kirby was responsible for bringing creations like the X-Men, Hulk, Iron Man, and DC’s New Gods to life. Today is also the date of the passing of actor
Chadwick Boseman, responsible for bringing the character Black Panther, one of artist Jack Kirby’s creations, to life on the movie screen for millions of fans worldwide. Boseman’s passing has been met with a collective and communal mourning from inside the fandom and without, demonstrating just how wide a reach these creations have for a very diverse array of fans. I mention Kirby and Boseman here to take a moment to reflect on the vast impact that comic books have achieved since the early days when Jack Kirby and Stan Lee first launched many of these caped crusaders into the world. Jack Kirby infamously stated, “comics will break your heart, kid,” but the acceptance and saturation of the medium into popular culture and beyond has proven that the impact of what was once hailed as little more than disposable, floppy children’s books is much greater than any of the initial creators could have anticipated.

I have written this final chapter to indicate the ways that my research might impact the field of rhetoric and composition. As a comic book writer, however, I would like to at least note that this research has implications beyond rhetoric and composition; it has impacted my work as a comics creator. This research has pushed me to reconsider how best to convey information in a script to the art team. By identifying the individual elements of a comics page in Chapter 3, I have also identified how those elements work together to create meaning. By understanding that process in detail, I am better able to direct the creative team on a given project. For example, in my most recent scripts I am considering new ways to move dialogue and captions outside of the confines of a panel frame and allow the lettering process to take more unique approaches to storytelling. This change is largely shaped by my thinking about how all elements on the page are working to communicate narrative meaning. By being more creative with all of the storytelling elements, the process of creating a comic and conveying meaning has the ability to grow the medium’s potential, which I will continue exploring as a writer.
Conclusion

At the beginning of this project I asked, “How did the NC logo become a meaning-making actant?” By tracing the logo’s lifecycle through production to the logo’s instantiation as a tattoo, I illustrated how an image such as the NC logo changes and transforms as it circulates and enters into associations outside of the pages of the comic book. As I have also argued images are complex rhetorical actants that deserve far more consideration than the space of this dissertation has to offer. The participants in this study provided in-depth insight into how the NC logo moved from the pages of a comic to a transformative, agentive actant in the form of a tattoo. While I was surprised by the many participants who changed the initial NC logo design to personalize the concept and the logo’s meaning, the most shocking piece of information gleaned from these interviews was the ability for the logo’s appearance as a tattoo to prompt action, particularly in the case of civic engagement. This realization drove home just how much power and agency visuals actually have.

I have offered comics and visuals as a more nuanced site of study that should be taken seriously by scholars of rhetoric and composition. The implications for this research in visual rhetoric, technical communication, and in the classroom have only been touched on here. What I’ve offered contributes to a nascent framework that takes comic books seriously.

In short, comics might actually mend your heart… and enhance your research agenda.
REFERENCES


Kraver, J. (2013). Reinventing the composition classroom, or how comics can clarify the writing process. SANE Journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education 1(3). 30-46.


APPENDIX A:

IMAGE PERMISSIONS

Permission from Matt Hawkins, President/COO of Top Cow Productions, Inc. for use of all images from *A Man Among Ye* used in Chapter 3:

Matt Hawkins

to me, Elena

To whom it may concern:

Stephanie Phillips has our (Top Cow Productions, Inc) permission to use any artwork from series she has written for Top Cow in her dissertation.

Best,

Matt Hawkins
COO/President

---

Permission from artist Craig Cermak, the artist behind *A Man Among Ye* used in Chapter 3:

**Definitely! Cool with me!**

Thanks!!!

Permission from BJS Inc. for use of images of their handcrafted *Bitch Planet* merchandise sold on Etsy.com used in Chapter 1:

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Alaina Spencer
BJS Inc.
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You may go ahead and use the photo, you have my full consent.

Thanks!

Pat

Permission from artist Maan House to include an image from *Devil Within* used in Chapter 3:

Hi Steph!
No problem at all! I feel flattered actually. All the best in the presentation! 😁😁😁
Let me know if you need anything else.
best! 😊

2:37 PM

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My pleasure! But you’re set and that’s enough.

---

Permission from cartoonist Jamie Jones for use of *The Baboon* comic strip appearing in Chapter 3:

yes of course you can use it!
Permission from @triatriatria for use of the *Bitch Planet* cosplay photo appearing in Chapter 1:

Thank you so much! I'm excited to read your dissertation. Yes, you have my permission to use my cosplay picture in it. Congratulations on your upcoming graduation!

12:36 PM

Permission from artist Dean Kotz for use of images from *The Butcher of Paris* used in Chapter 3:

Hey, Steph!

Good to hear from you. Of course, feel free to whatever Butcher images you want. Best of luck with the dissertation!

Hope you’re doing well!

Best,

Dean

An excerpt from my contract with Dark Horse Comics detailing my ownership of the *Butcher of Paris* IP:

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**Congratulations Stephanie!!!! So proud of you, that’s great.**

You have our blessing to use what you want from the books we have done together.
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> oh Gosh .... THANK YOU so much for asking me ... what can I tell you ... I'm very very honored and thank you from my heart! Of course!...would be great! for anything you need do not hesitate to contact me!

Permission from Artist Stephen Byrne for use of the colorist challenge pages by Project Art Cred used in Chapter 3:

> The line art in the colorist challenge page is mine and I’m fine with you using that, if the colorists themselves are :)  
>  
> Stephen  
>  
> Twitter.com/cred_art  
>  
> Projectartcred.tumblr.com

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 Fri 11:39 AM ✓

> Hi! Yeah, absolutely you can use it!  
>  
> 8:17 AM

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 Fri 11:32 AM ✓

> Hello Stephanie!  
> I would be totally okay with that! Thank you for asking :)  
> I know it’s even harder to be writing thesis and finishing PHDs these days, so I wish you the best of luck with it!

 Fri 11:44 AM
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Many thanks and good luck with the PhD,

Carl

Carl M. Gropper
Will Eisner Studios, Inc.

Permission from artist and property co-owner Valentine de Landro for use of Bitch Planet images throughout this dissertation:

Hello Stephanie!

I’m sorry, my email seems to be eating my replies to you.

Yes — all good to use the images.

Congratulations on your dissertation!

~Valentine
January 17, 2019

Stephanie Phillips
English
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB#: Pro00038600
Title: The Power of Non-Compliant Logos: A New Materialist Approach to Comic Studies

Study Approval Period: 1/17/2019 to 1/17/2020

Dear Ms. Phillips:

On 1/17/2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
Version 1.9 Dec 2018 IRB Pro00038600

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
SB Verbal Consent Form 1.4.19 Clean.docx

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent documents are valid until the consent document is amended and approved. Verbal forms are not stamped.

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:
(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.117(c) which states that an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it finds either: (1) That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject’s wishes will govern; or (2) That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context. (Verbal consent)

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) business days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Melissa Sloan, PhD, Vice Chairperson

USF Institutional Review Board